

On Mermaids

AN EXPLORATION OF MERMAID FOLKLORE
FROM ANCIENT ORIGINS TO MODERN CULTURE



RONALD L. MURPHY, JR.
Folklorist, Cryptozoologist, Investigator

On Mermaids

BY

Ronald L. Murphy, Jr.

Dedication

For my little mermaid Willow



ISBN-13: 978-1530702411

ISBN-10: 1530702410

On Mermaids

by

Ronald L. Murphy, Jr.

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Foreword

Ron Murphy has been called “the cryptozoological guru” by Dave Scott of the internationally popular podcast, Spaced Out Radio, and I must agree whole-heartedly with that analogy.

Ron is considered a world-class expert on faery lore and has researched the unexplained from Maine to Florida as well as in the United Kingdom.

Ron is a member of Center for Unexplained Events and Center for Cryptozoological Studies (CUE & CCS respectively).

My name is Terrie Seech and I am the director and co-founder of Center for Unexplained Events and co-founder of Center for Cryptozoological Studies. My friend, Ron Murphy asked if I would write the foreword for his book on Mermaids. I questioned him about this, but he insisted. So I apolo-gize for myself in advance. Not only is Ron an award-winning author and world-class expert, but he is also an award-winning and world-class friend, who I am absolutely thrilled to have met and known since 2013.

I know Ron to be an intense researcher who immerses himself in whatever cryptic topic has caught his interest. Ron is a well-rounded, well-educated, articulate and passionate person who is also down-to-Earth with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Two days after being asked to write this foreword, I received the rough draft of this book and immediately dove right into it, submerging myself into the sea of Mermaids. Knowing Ron personally I could not wait to get my feet wet.

Now, I know what you, the reader, may be thinking. When you picked up this book (with a smirk or chuckle), thought or said “Come on now, really, Mermaids?” I know it sounds a bit fishy, but don’t bail out yet.

Ron will take you, with a grain of salt, through the origins, history and evolution of the legendary, mythological water spirit otherwise known as Mermaids, Mermen, and Merfolk.

Ron intellectually conveys the rationality of such beings' existence through his immense and thorough research which includes eyewitness reports recorded throughout the course of history all over the world. Whether or not they are mere legend or an actual part of reality, Mermaids have been and will continue to be a captivating part of history.

I hope you will enjoy this book as much as I have. Don't hesitate. Go ahead and jump right in, feet first, and explore the world of the deep where the (mythological) aquatic creatures known as Mermaids reside Terrie Seech

Researcher, Investigator, Archivist Co-author of Mysterious Mercer County, privately published Director and co-founder of Center for Unexplained Events (CUE) Co-founder of Center for Cryptozoological Studies (CCS)



ON MERMAIDS

Introduction

Let's get our feet wet, shall we...

Do you believe in mermaids?

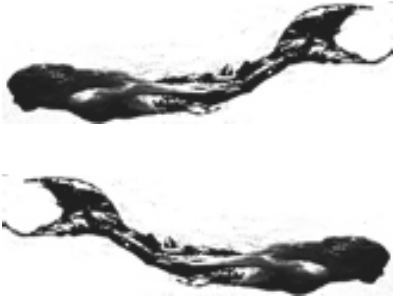
It is a fair question and, as a researcher into mysterious creatures, one that I am asked from time to time. Since I was a child, I have had a keen interest in cryptozoology and have written several books on the history of entities uncatalogued by mainstream sciences. Belief, however, is a concept that requires the concept of faith. There is a quasi-religious element to the notion of "belief" in anything outside of your personal, subjective experience. Since I have no first-hand encounters with mermaids, I cannot quantify belief in them. And approaching any subject in the cryptozoological field you must be necessarily skeptical. Therefore, I cover topics on the history of cryptids and their place within the worldview of various cultures throughout time.

And, believe me, there is a vast history written through the ages on this very beguiling subject of the mermaid.

So then, since there is so much recorded lore on these aquatic beings, do mermaids exist?

Unflinchingly, I say yes. This is not a very scientific answer to the query because I can provide no corporeal proof; however, to my satisfaction, these creatures do indeed exist. I must also state that the imagined creature of the classical mermaid probably is not swimming somewhere undiscovered in the oceans as you read this. How, then, does one who does not believe in their physical existence maintain that they are real? Isn't this a dichotomy that cannot be reconciled with these two seemingly opposing worldviews?

Absolutely not. Mermaids have existed in the human imagination since we



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first set eyes on the shimmering seas that border our solid world. They are part of the collective experience of mankind, imbedded in our inquisitive soul. You see, mermaids, at their very essence, are the archetypes of the untamed oceans, the embodiment of nature, the personification of environmental forces. Mermaids have seeped through the currents of the past and made their way upstream into our culture and have become part of us, an enduring folk memory that affects us even in this age of unbridled technology. We as a people of the human race write about them, paint them, and make movies and musicals about them. My child has a stuffed plush play toy of a mermaid. Indeed, it is my daughter's wide-eyed questions that led me to write this exhaustively researched book. Therefore, unequivocally, I can tell you mermaids do indeed exist in that they live in our oceanic imagination.

What, then, is a mermaid?

Well, that question is what this book will attempt to explore. Are they simply the corporeal figure representing the incorporeal natural world? Or maybe they are metaphysical entities that swim in the realm of the faery.

Possibly mermaids are uncatalogued species that ply the remote waves of the immense oceans, watery cryptids who, from time to time, lure unsuspecting sailors to their death. Whatever the mermaid's nature is or is not, mermaids undoubtedly personify a world that is still untamed, that remains wild and a bit wanton, and, above all else, unexplored. Mermaids are relentless reminders that this modern world still has some mysteries yet to be uncovered. And the world needs mysteries.

Our 21st century cosmopolitan culture is ever shrinking time and space, the continents linked together through the internet and rapid globalization.

We are dependent upon computer chips, weaned on touch screens, and communicate by satellite. Few of us search for answers beyond the Google of our ever-present cell phones. The wild, uncultivated places, the domain of the wild things, are being bulldozed over to create corporate spaces and institutionalized factory farming. We, as a human race, have moved away from the uncivilized areas, taming them or, in a disdain mixed with a certain degree of trepidation, destroying them. But, you see, we also need the hidden places. We need to have those nooks and crannies that we can't conquer, where the wild things still dance the night away, hidden from our electronic gaze. Here, in the shadowy places of the world, cloistered from prying human eyes, legends are conjured. And here the legends still thrive!

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There in the sea, in the dark and briny depths, amid forests of kelp undulating in warm oceanic tides, mermaids still swim undetected in the turquoise blue of the seas we cannot possibly endeavor to contain.

We, as curious human beings, have been and probably will always be inextricably drawn to the ocean. It is the source from which we came from, the womb of our primordial ooze, the cradle of Genesis; and, like the ever-beaconing tide, this same sea has an incessant gravity that pulls us in. Sometime before 546 BC, the Milesian philosopher, Anaximander, had deduced logically and correctly surmised that humanity had sprung from

the aquatic womb of the ocean. Anaximander believed that humans, who begin life with the fragility of a prolonged infancy, could not have survived as a race without the necessary buoyancy of the ocean. But even this close biological association with our oceanic foundation and our poetic love for the water does not take away from its metaphysical mystique; indeed, if anything, it adds to the fascination!

The ocean is swarming with all varieties of life, magical and enchanting, and utterly puzzling. It provides a constantly shifting demarcation between the realm of the creatures of the land and the denizens of the deep. Under those salty waters, a varied, complex ecosystem exists that rivals-- if not surpasses-- this wondrous world of us land loving air breathers. Our minds scan the line on the horizon, in awe and conjecture, overcome with a sense of minuteness as we consider the rolling universe sprawled out before us. Questions stir in our soul, spinning, forming a tidal pool that whisks us under its unfathomable, murky depths. What lies beneath those briny waters? Is something very similar to us out there, living under the whiter-capped break-ers to which we have no predilection? Does a species like us in appearance and intelligence forsake the land for the salvation of the sea, unfettered by the gravity of our world? These are the questions that tantalize me as waves break around my ankles and my feet sink into the shifting sand as I stand before the abyss of legend and myth. This yearning of mine to dive under the salty swell and discover the secrets of the watery realm is the purpose of this book. It is a forum in which to query what may swim under the seas that cover nearly 75% of this globe. This book is about pondering the possibilities.

After all, new species are discovered yearly in our remote exotic rainforests or in the isolation of mountain strongholds, hidden away from the en-





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croachment of the human race in these nearly inaccessible and wholly inhospitable locales. According to the internet science resource, appropriately named WiseGeek, “Each year, scientists identify about 15,000 new species of animals, plants, fungi or microorganisms.” It is estimated that about 86%

of existing species on Earth have yet to be discovered or identified. That percentage might be even higher for ocean species in particular, because scientists have more difficulty exploring the watery universe that is our planet’s seas. Actually, this analogy to the cosmic is appropriate. The oceans are more space-like than recognizably terrestrial. It is a fact that the umbrella term “science” knows more about the surface of the moon than the bottom of our oceans. To further illustrate this point, it is important to consider that less than 10% of this watery living space has even been visited by humanity!

Consider the immensity of these facts for a moment, if you will. The oceans comprise about 140 million square miles. That is three times the ecosystem as the land environments possess. More than 97 percent of the Earth’s water is in the oceans. However, whereas the land has such encapsulating factors as defining regional biomes, where such territories are segmented into the heights of mountains comprising alpine zones and vast areas of trees comprise forest biomes, the oceans have a much less confining cylindrical composition. Therefore, the zones of the oceans have many more livable climates than the world above and beyond the surface. However, if legends are to be believed (and I firmly feel that they are in quite a few incidences), mermaids are mammals. Much attention, after all, has been focused on their bare breasts, a hallmark of the mammalian order (indeed, the word “mammal”

derives from the Latin mamma which means “breast), so, if this is the case and there is an animal responsible for mermaid sightings or if mermaids are

in and of themselves a specific sentient species heretofore unverified, then they must dwell in zones sufficient for mammalian life.

All ocean going mammals reside mainly in the photic, or sunlit, region of the world's oceans. Not only is food abundant in this region, and mammals need adequate calories to power their large brains, but the dappling of the light actually serves as a vital means of camouflage for these animals. This zone, in open oceans, can extend to as deep as 700 feet in depth. That being said, that does not necessitate that mammals are confined to this photic region. As a matter of fact, harp seals have been known to dive as deep as 1500 feet and the deepest recorded dive of an elephant seal is 7,835 feet, taking the creature into the black abyssal benthic zone. Now these are sim-

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ply base measurements on which conjecture can be tested. If mermaids do in fact exist, they most probably have adapted evolutionarily over the span of time that these figures don't precisely pertain to them. But if they are living organisms, at home in our world's oceans, then mermaids must abide by the laws of nature. This is how science works. That being said, the vastness of the oceans can easily facilitate an animal such as a mermaid.

You must understand, the ocean is definitely not a barren, featureless wasteland. It has a diverse topography, full of those essential nooks and crannies where creatures unknown to science cannot only live but even thrive undetected. There are vast mountain ranges under the surface of our seas, these oceanic ridges forming a great mountain chain, almost 40,000

miles long, that weaves its way through all the major oceans. This mountain range is the largest single feature on Earth. And also a convenient route to follow for migration purposes, a sort of natural highway running along the bottom of the ocean floor. The highest mountain of this feature is Mauna Kea in the state of Hawaii, which rises 33,474 feet from its base on the sea bed. This is an immense underwater world that we, who have subjugated the land, can only flaccidly ponder theoretically.

Now we must take into account that the average depth of the ocean is a mind-boggling 12,200 feet. That is a lot of volume to consider. And not only the sheer volume, but ponder this profound fact—the deepest point is 36,198 feet in the Mariana Trench in the western Pacific. Taking all these factors into consideration, there are plenty of places to hide, especially for a self-aware, intellectually elusive denizen of the deep. With this rudimentary knowledge of this watery world, one must ask what could lie beneath, hidden from our scientific eyes?

Now let us ponder this undersea realm together, an ecosystem many of us have splashed and swam in at its very fringes without taking into account that it may be the domain of a similar species known colloquially as a mermaid.

We will track this entity through history and chart its watery course through world religions. We will consider mermaid sightings and the inevitable hoax-es. We will ponder the mermaid's presence in art and literature, and its undeniable influence on popular culture. We will consider the mermaid's status as an archetypal figure and as a personification of nature. But allow a glimmer of possibility to flicker in your mind as well. For this book, I'm asking one to at least consider the possibility that an uncatalogued sentient





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species awaiting scientific classification may wander the deep trenches and ply the swift currents of our world's oceans.

I'm asking you, the reader, to explore the world of the mermaid with me.

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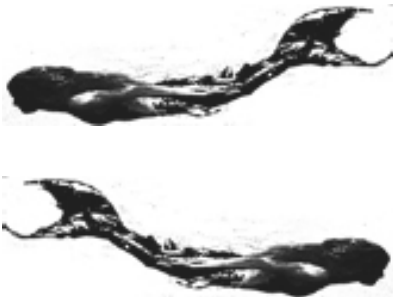
Origins

According to a worldview found throughout varied traditional cultures, the creation of the earth was made with such sublime symmetry that all creatures who lived on the land had an equivalent in the ocean. C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, part of his *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, reiterates this by showing that an ordered world of rulers and vassals exists under the waves as a mirror image of our own. These merpeople were inhabitants of the aquatic nation state known as the Bight of Calormen in the Great Eastern Ocean. They are described as traditional merfolk, with the heads, torsos, and arms of human men and women, and long fish tails below the waists. But the author was drawing from traditions that lead us back into the very beginning of what it means to be human.

This humanizing conception was also extended to include the heavens and the subsequent anthropologizing of natural forces. This was a way for early

man to conceptualize a world around him whose workings were quite mysterious and beyond their control. Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist, coined the term “structuralism” to explain this polarization and projection of the known world onto the unknown cosmos. Structuralism is the belief that the phenomena of nature which interacts with human life is not intel-ligible except through created interrelations. Storms are caused by an angry god that needs appeased is one instance of a structuralized interaction. Early man did not understand meteorology but he did understand the fickleness and violence of humanity. Therefore, the gods and goddesses of the world’s pantheon are created in our own image because that is how we best confront the world—through the understanding of human interaction. If our ocean, in the age of advanced technology, is still an unknown, unexplored world, imagine what it was to our ancestors! Thus many anthologists believe that mermaids were created through the lens of structuralism so the ancients

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could hope to grasp the workings of the sea. If there were people on land with a culture and family units, so too must the sea have a corresponding reconcilability. The lineage of this notion is maintained in the word “mermaid.”

Mermaid is a compound of the Old English words “mere,” meaning sea, and “maid,” an antiquated term denoting a girl or young woman. The equivalent term in the Middle Ages was “merewif.” But this notion of an

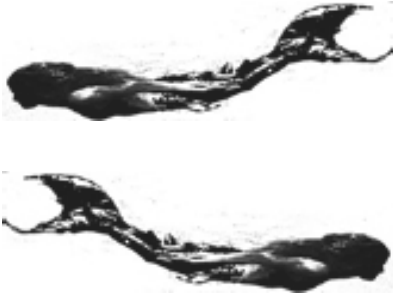
aquatic humanoid is, of course, much more ancient than their Old English verbiage.

The possibility of a man-like aquatic race populating the salty realm has been on the mind of humanity since the dawn of thought. In an attempt at conceptualizing these beings, these creatures have been called various names in a myriad of cultures. But the ideal of oceanic humanoids is part of the human vernacular, first captured in art from the time of the first hunter/

gather development of a tenuous proto-culture. In the desert of Africa, of all places, we find strange, enigmatic images of an aquatic anthropoid memorialized in rock art by a culture referred to as the San. It is in this dimly illuminated dawn of human artistic creation where we shall begin our survey of the mermaid. But let us venture back together into the foggy realm of antiquity and research the first depiction of mermaids in the annals of history.

Primitive man needed to have an acute, intimate relationship with the natural world in order to survive. As we are the dominate intelligent species on the face of the earth, we have, in most Western societies, succeeded in leaving the forests behind and establishing what we call “civilization.” In doing so, we have forgotten much about the once vital synchronization and dependency on the natural world. In groups of loosely connected humans living in the Neolithic, this relationship with nature had a necessary and vital intimacy. In early nature-based societies, people, like the San, understood that having a harmonious and balanced relationship with their deified Mother-Earth was crucial for their survival. In Australia, where the environment is just as inhospitable, the Aboriginal people speak of ancient spirits that made the land, trees and animals and that still live in sacred water holes.

Indigenous Australians’ oral traditions and spiritual values are based upon reverence for the land and a belief in the Dreamtime. The Dreaming is considered to be both the ancient time of creation and the present day reality of Dreaming. It is a time out of time, inhabited by animist forces that per-vade the Dreamtime. This belief includes the concept of spirit beings, called Yawkyawks, which are personified as mermaid-like creatures. They appear



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as young women with fish tails and long hair resembling flowing strands of green seaweed, which live hidden within the waterways. Yawkyawks have the power to give life, thus their representation as female forms. These spirits are capable of shapeshifting, a direct allusion to the changing nature of the weather. In their capacity as water beings, the Yawkyawks can also manipulate the weather, meting out drinking water and rain so plants can grow. They are thus cast in the role as the giver and sustainer of life. Within this Aboriginal belief, just passing near a Yawkyawks' dwelling in a water hole can make a woman pregnant.

Indigenous cultures saw how valuable clean water was to life, and considered it sacred. In fact, they believed water itself was alive, and that water spirits, goddesses and monsters inhabited the rivers, lakes and ponds. They believed, too, that these creatures were responsible for the storms, floods and droughts which affected their lives, and as such, needed to be appeased. In short, cultures in Africa and Australia, even though a world away from contact with each other, saw and revered the power of nature, and were aware that if they mistreated the earth, it would mistreat them in return. The relatives of those of this San culture of southern Africa, to this very day, have kept a vital link with their past. This culture has managed to maintain a flicker of remembrance concerning what life once was in their world millennia ago.

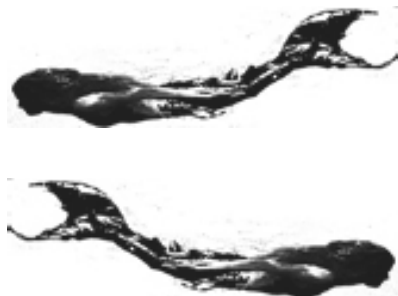
The San people are genetic ancestors of the bushmen who have lived in this same African region for tens of thousands of years. They still depend on

nature for survival. Their dependency on the natural world is a relationship nearly impossible to comprehend by the civilized Western World. But the San people, even today, have the folk memory that stretches back, rooted in this deep, personal affinity to nature. This relationship is a continuous tradition dating to the rock art the people who were the origins of these San used to document their lives.

Due to the materials used in their artistic production, these paintings are difficult to date but there is anthropological evidence, including many dateable hunting implements, that the San people dwelled in the Drakensberg region of Africa from at least 40,000 years ago, and possibly over 100,000

years ago. The earliest examples of this ancient rock art carbon dates to an astounding 26,000 years ago! To put this in perspective, this art of the San is roughly 6,000 years earlier than the cave art found in the famous caves of Lascaux.

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Not only is this site ancient in artistic merit, it also documents the climate change and ecology that once existed in this now desert biome. Aquatic fossils and seashells are scattered throughout the San people's range, proving that about 250 million years ago this entire Karoo area was under the sea.

As climate changed, the vast inland sea evaporated, leaving swamps teeming with reptiles, amphibians, fish and mollusk, traces of which can be found today in the form of fossils. It is still said in indigenous tongues that

this whole region area had once been under the sea, but not until the discovery of fossilized sea-shells embedded in the rocks were these aboriginal tales taken seriously by science.

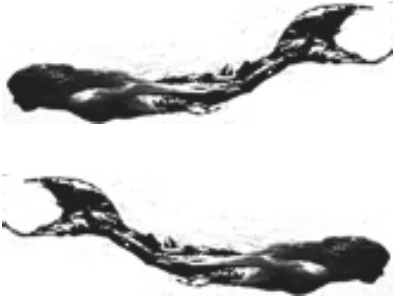
This is what makes this rock art so utterly fascinating—it is documenting a time when the ocean existed where desert is now found. According to information documented by drakensbergmountains.co.za, 3,900 paintings have been recorded at 17 sites. One of these sites, known as the Sebaayeni Cave, contains 1,146 individual paintings. The website, southafrica.info, indicates that “[t]he rock art of the Drakensberg is the largest and most concentrated group of rock paintings in Africa south of the Sahara, and is outstanding both in quality and diversity of subject.” And one feature of this rock art is an odd group of images that seem to suggest mermaid-like creatures.

San rock paintings on the walls of caves, high up in the desert mountains of Africa, depicting mermaid-like creatures? These enigmatic paintings have puzzled archaeologists for years. Does this mean that the San people saw mermaids? Of course most mainstream scientists will declare such a notion an impossibility. Many of these academic experts who have studied San culture and rock art believe that rather than being a realistic depiction of something the aboriginal culture had physically witnessed, these paintings are symbolic of the experience a shaman went through when calling for rain, and that the images misinterpreted as ocean-going mermaids are actually the depiction of swifts or swallows. These species of birds are believed to be associated with rain, according to scientific theory, and the art represents these creatures rather than mermaids.

Very near Botswana, these enigmatic paintings adorn rocking cliffs. Most of the images are of elands and gazelles and other easily recognized animals.

However, some of the images are a combination of human and animal form.

The images of the mermaids, seen here, have been interpreted by some researchers as stylistic representations of swifts. However, as easily viewed



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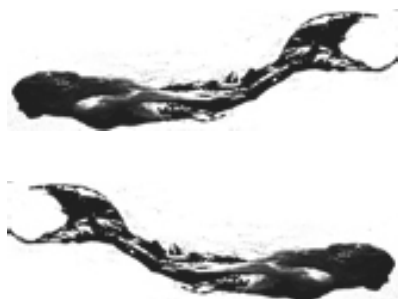
Sabaayeni Cave Painting, South africa

by the central figure in this area of the paintings, the image indeed seems to be holding something in its hands. These pieces of art could, of course, be sympathetic magic used by shamans hoping to cross over into the spirit world in order to procure rain. A man-fish may be a reasonable persona to take on to achieve such a desire. Or, perhaps, the San was actually depicting a part of nature, painting what they actually saw in their environment. I must point out from a skeptical perspective that an extinct species of elephant seal did once exist in Africa and these images may be a stylized

interpretation of that mammal, fulfilling the role of the manatee as the reasonable culprit in many mermaid sightings. That being said, this in no way rules out that the San were not recording an interaction with actual mermaids. The mermaid may have been a figure as ordinary to them as the eland and lion. In Africa, and even in Australia, eyewitnesses are still reporting encounters with ripar-ian mermaids to this very day.

I must concede from a scientific perspective, that the idea of this rock art being an artistically stylized representation of birds is not completely unfounded. When the rains come to a desert environment, life virtually explodes out of the ground. It is plausible that birds followed storms with the promise of a feast of flying insects filling the air after the rains came. But isn't it odd that mainstream science will allow this sympathetic magic imagery of

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birds to be related to water but dismiss the notion that something associated with water like a mermaid to be too far afield? Air dwelling swallows make more sense than water living mermaids? It should be noted at this juncture that there are examples of figures in this ancient African art that seem to suggest rather strongly that these painted images of imagined birds are holding something in their hands!

If these painted images are holding objects in their “hands” then these can’t possibly be wings of birds and, therefore, by rational extension, must be the

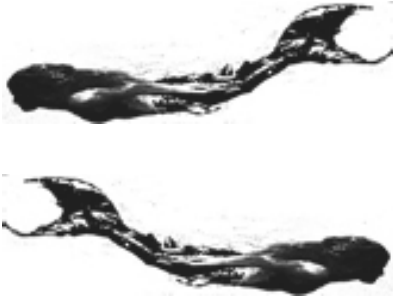
arms...of a mermaid-like creature. Admittedly these representational images are not the romanticized mermaids in the Western storybook sense.

And, alas, they may indeed be sympathetic magical entities of cultural religion elicited by an enthusiastic shaman; but this art, then, at least depicts the shamanistic experience of conjuring rain where the shaman becomes half-human and half-fish in a heightened trance state. According to Dorothy Din-nerstein's book, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, human-animal hybrids such as mermaids and minotaurs convey the emergent understanding of the ancients that human beings were both one with and different from animals: [Human] nature is internally inconsistent, that our continuities with, and our differences from, the earth's other animals are mysterious and profound; and in these conti-

nuities, and these differences, lie both a sense of strangeness on earth and the possible key to a way of feeling at home here.

This melding of man and animal in ritual can be seen in other cave paintings in Europe, the image of the Sorcerer being one such example.

In a place as unforgiving as the deserts of Africa and Australia, ritualized magic in a traditional hunter/gatherer culture played an essentially important role as well. Sympathetic magic allowed nature to be controlled and subdued, although never wholly tamed. It seems to me that in many ways mermaids fit this role as an intermediary, a conduit between the world of the land and the world of the sea. Mermaids straddle a fine line between human and animal. We have lost touch with our place in the world. Indeed, that is why we can so easily destroy it. But in studying the life ways of people like the San, the respect and values held by these people who live in harmony with nature, is what is needed in our world today. And, in my opinion, this is the reason that the image of the mermaid is still so popular even in the 21st



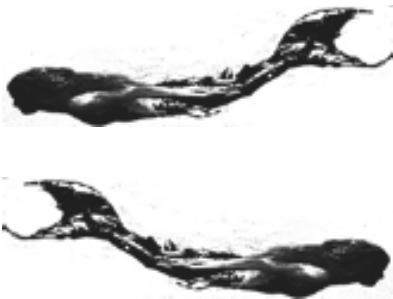
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“the Sorcerer” - trois-frèreS Cavern, franCe

The Sorcerer is one name for this enigmatic cave painting found in the cavern referred to as ‘The Sanctuary’ at Trois-Frères, Ariège, France. This artwork was produced sometimes around 13,000 BC, much later than the depiction of the mermaid-like figures painted by the San. The figure’s significance is unknown, but it is usually interpreted as some kind of great spirit or master of animals.

The Sorcerer illustrates the notion of encapsulating the natural world anthropologically in order to better understand its workings. Some researchers think this encapsulation was meant as a way to ultimately control the world around the cultures creating the art. To gain achievement in the hunt, it seems as if a shaman had reached a state where he and the prey become one. He is thus imbued with the essence of the animal, assuring mastery over the intended prey. This type of belief in controlling the world around you through ritual and transcendental communication with the other world is known as sympathetic magic.

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century. The mermaid is a continuity with the folk magic all but forgotten, remembered only in our collective soul. The magical qualities with which traditional societies imbued nature is in fact what kept them from mistreating it. With all our atheistic sophistication and educated arrogance, it always amazes me how much we are still oblivious to the world around us. If we open our eyes, we can indeed see magic in the mundane.

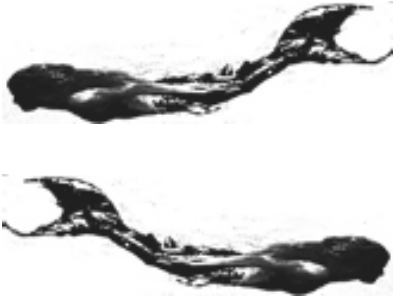
To provide a contemporary explanation of such “magic,” esteemed Japanese researcher Dr. Masaru Emoto’s recent discovery that water responds to human intent is one modern-day example of the mysteries of the universe we have yet to realize let alone begin to comprehend. Taking a series of photographs, Dr. Emoto showed that newly formed crystals of frozen water varied in shape and complexity depending on how polluted the water was and on the emotional intent it was exposed to. He found that water from clear springs and water that had been exposed to loving words showed brilliant, multifaceted, and colorful snowflake patterns when examined under a microscope. In contrast, polluted water, or water exposed to negative thoughts and words, formed incomplete, asymmetrical patterns with dull colors. Could ancient cultures have innately realized this interconnection?

With three-quarters of the Earth and three-quarters of our body being made up of water, the impact of Dr. Emoto’s research could be ground-breaking in terms of our understanding of the positive effect we can have on the earth and on our personal health. We are connected to nature in ways we have forgotten. Those intimate with water know not scientifically but implicitly that there is magic in the water. And that magic may indeed be represented in the guise of a mermaid. In this instance, the mermaid is a unifying symbol of our oneness with nature.

And perhaps this is what the San people still have – a connection with the earth which allows them to still see the sacred in nature. They say, for example, that in parts of their region of Africa, children as old as 5 have never seen rain! And then when the drought breaks and the rains eventually do come, the storms can be devastatingly ferocious, resulting in destructive floods. The San people know that water is sacred, both life-giving and deadly.

To delve into the San culture linguistically, these people may have believed that an aquatic human species lived in this area when the ocean held sway.

The San’s modern term used to describe this folk recollection is a “see-



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meid.” This “see-maid” is said to have the body of a woman, and a fish-tail, and that these creatures had once lived in this now desert region. Of course this is an Anglicized synchronization of our term “mermaid,” anthropologically demonstrating the cross-pollination of terms and even beliefs brought in by colonization, but it is still quite interesting in searching for the proper term to call these creatures, “sea-maid” was chosen by the San.

But as we investigate the San notion of the “sea-maid” further, we uncover that the notion of this entity not simply being relegated to the past, a childish invention of a pagan culture who had to anthropomorphize to understand.

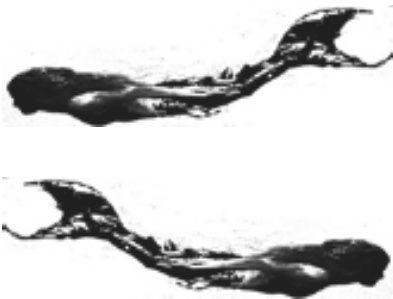
No, indeed. For these creatures that were said to swim in the now disappeared ocean of the Karoo region populated by the San are still occasionally seen in its rivers! A local farmer related a nearly unbelievable story of how, when he was 8-years old (and again when he was 12!), he’d been sent to gather wood in the nearby deep ravine. There in the ravine, along the river that swept through it, the boy caught sight of a beautiful woman sitting on a rock at the foot of a waterfall. The understandably awe-struck boy described the mermaid as very friendly (probably because of the unabashed nudity he witnessed), but said that all of a sudden he realized that she wasn’t an ordinary woman, and that instead of legs, she had a fish tail. She gave him a friendly wave, and when he waved back, the creature then slipped into the confines of the river and disappeared. Relating this sighting to his parents, the completely credulous mother and father explained that this creature he saw must have been a mermaid and they

went on to tell their son that mermaids have been spoken about in this area from since the time long, long ago.

Examining this eyewitness sighting, it seems quite apparent that the story has been passed down from generation to generation – of a beautiful woman with blue eyes, pink cheeks and a fish tail, sitting by the deep mountain pools all over the Karoo region, combing her long black hair idly on the bank.

The act of combing her hair is undoubtedly a European notion transmitted through cultural contact and will be investigated further in the chapter discussing mermaids in the Middle Ages. But notwithstanding this aberration, there is in this tale an interesting point to consider-- why, in Sub-Saharan Africa, is the mermaid described as being non-black? Consider for a moment that the description of a pink skin humanoid water dweller exists long before Western contact. Some scientists of course contend these descriptions are of a river dolphin, whose skin can sometimes appear quite pink. But in a culture so closely linked to the natural world and the animals around them,

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it seems rather dismissive to accuse the eyewitnesses for misidentification of an animal with which they would have a working knowledge.

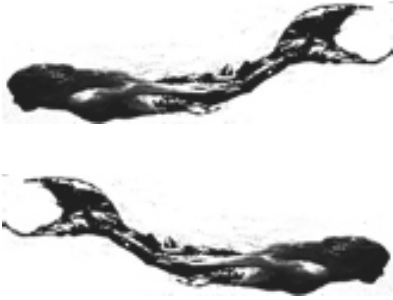
Many Australian Aborigines of today also believe that mermaids still exist in their waters and rivers. In some Northern Territory regions, mermaids were believed to instruct women in ceremonial procedures in early

Dreamtime, particularly those procedures related to fertility. It was believed that they are still present in the modern world, living in the remaining remote areas of the continent, and can still be seen sitting on rocks, but would quickly jump back into the water if they saw anyone coming. An Aboriginal story, related by Vanessa Witschi, in her treatise *Folklore and Australian Indigenous Culture*, tells of a man who set a trap to capture a mermaid, who he then tied to a tree. He treated her very kindly and eventually she agreed to be his wife. They had children together but she disappeared into the river one day after being reminded of her mermaid form when she saw her reflection in the water. This, of course, is a variation on the mirror motif attached to the mermaid, but an interesting attribute shared by many different cultures around the globe. The allegory present within this tale is that nature is the source of all life, but it can take as quickly as it gives and, ultimately, nature can never be controlled.

To the San culture as well, the mermaid does indeed have direct correlation to the natural world. Her presence is often beneficial, bringing life-giving rain. But a part of her nature can also be destructive—like nature, she brings floods. Sometimes she is personified as the rushing waters, fickle and dangerous, pulling people into herself, and drowning them, much like the mermaids from European tales who lured sailors to a similar watery death.

Like Nature, this mermaid described by the San is duplicitous. But like all other aspects of nature, this creature is also respected because it is part of the fabric that connects us with the natural world.

Before we leave this formative chapter on the history of the mermaid, I would like to point out that the story of the mermaid is still being written in Africa. These beings seem, in the end, not to be purely personifications of the essential elements after all. Indeed, in 2008, there was a sighting of a mermaid that occurred in a village in the Western Cape region of South Africa. Fisherman reported coming upon a mermaid thrashing about in a river. One eyewitness described the mermaid to be a white woman with long black hair. Again, out of Africa, as in the accounts related by a witness

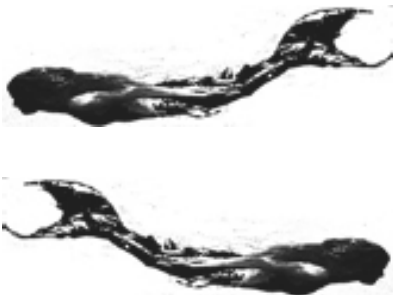


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from the Karoo area, we have the description of this creature as appearing closer to Caucasian. And I would assume a person who made a living as a fisherman could differentiate between known species of aquatic animals and something as fantastic as a mermaid.

As recently as 2012, an officially appointed spokesperson in Zimbabwe reported mermaids harassing government employees as they labored in dam construction in different areas of a river. The Water Resource Minister even stated that tribal chiefs were to perform traditional rituals to drive the mermaids out of the rivers. There is, of course, the blend of shamanistic beliefs crashing with the modernity of water pump installation. But the one thing we must consider in the African reports is that the creature we call a mermaid has been reported from a time when the ocean covered this region that is now desert and that these creatures are seen there even today, still described as being curiously white and living in the deep rivers that crisscross the otherwise arid landscape.

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The Evolution of Mermaids in Myth and Religion of the Ancient World

The creature known as the mermaid very soon evolved from ambiguous rock art, a mysterious aquatic entity of a nebulous concept that is still debated, into a more substantial character that concretely interacted with humanity. Here we can see the leap from the idea of the mermaid as a conduit in sympathetic magic to the status of a revered god that directly impacts humanity. In time, the mermaid was deified, becoming the bringer of storms and the causer of ship wrecks. It is out of this religious world that the mermaid begins to become familiar to us, taking shape as the fish-tailed creature that will sing sailors to the rocks. The flat dimensionality of the mermaid in primitive ochre paintings slowly morphed into an all-encompassing nature god that reigned with abandon over the vast oceans.

As early human civilization formed around the fecundity of the rivers and seas, proto-religion often had at its core a great focus on the dangers and wonders that were hid under the surging tides, obscured from wondering eyes. Because of the inherent mystery of the watery realm, some of the earliest known gods were spawned from these waters, and, keeping within the guidelines of structuralism, they are depicted as some recognizable combination of human and fish.

This schema is illustrated in the 7000-year-old Akkadian god known as Ea. To the Sumerians, the god Ea resided in the sea. Because of his association with the copious life within the ocean, Ea, like the spirits that inhabited the world of the Aborigines, was also the god of creation. This nature deity is the bringer of life out of the oceanic cradle as well as evolving into the eponymous benefactor of culture, gifting humanity with the knowledge of the arts and burgeoning sciences.





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Within two millennia, the god Ea had evolved into the Babylonian fish-tailed god called Oannes. This god also brought order to humanity. It was said that Oannes had a human voice and taught his people the skills necessary for civilization. In the Louvre today can be seen an eighth century B.C.

bas-relief of oannes - Musée du Louvre, Paris, France

While this image of Oannes seems to depict a priest dressed in the garb of a fish rather than an actual representation of the god itself, we can clearly see Oannes as a deity with an undeniable link to the oceans, comprising elements of human and fish.

wall-scene depicting Oannes as a merman, with the fish-like tail and the upper body of a man.

This deity was believed to leave the sea in the day and return to its depths at night. According to the great maritime researcher Richard Ellis, in his authoritative research compiled in his book *Monsters of the Sea*, this behavior demonstrated by Oannes would account for the god's amphibious characterization and depiction in art. Oannes was a creature that was not a conduit between two worlds, this god had now evolved into an inhabitant that could easily transition between the realms of land and water. This amphibious nature had innate power and by extension demonstrated authority over both domains.

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Very soon, religion in Babylon provided a feminine element by ascribing a consort to the powerful Oannes. In this female sea god, we find the greatest resemblance to the traditional mermaid. Her Assyrian name was Atargatis. She was anthropomorphized as a woman with the tail of a fish. Like the forces of nature, this mermaid was inextricably associated with perilous events such as floods, storms, shipwrecks and drowning. This aspect of the mermaid developed in many other folk traditions around the ancient world of the Near East. But in the guise of Atargatis we find the impetus for the stereotypical image of the mermaid as well as the development of many of the mermaid's attributes.

Atargatis was the chief goddess of northern Syria. Patterned after the other sea deities extant in the region, Atargatis was primarily the goddess of fertility. As 21st century observers of fertility goddesses, we often cast an aura of love around these figures as well. Atargatis can be seen as a natural

continu-ation of Bronze Age goddesses, evolving into the fecund “Lady Goddess of the Sea.” Doves became an emblem of this goddess of love as well, but her primary emblem was naturally the fish, seen as symbolic of the fertility and life of the waters. It is interesting to note here the beginning of an interesting and utterly fascinating connection between birds and mermaids. Structurally speaking, these respective creatures both inhabit realms that are polar opposite to each other, with humanity residing in the middle realm. The mermaid, denizens of the deep, and birds, avians of the air, are intermediaries between our world and theirs. This may provide the explanation for the association with birds and mermaids.

In the guise of the Lady Goddess of the Sea, fish were considered sacred to Atargatis. According to researcher Nelson Glueck, in an authoritative article he authored in the scholarly review, *American Journal of Archaeology*, at temples dedicated to Atargatis, there were ponds containing fish only her priests might dare to touch, apparently for some purpose of divination, but the exact reason for interacting personally with the fish in the temple pools have been unfortunately lost in the passage of time. If the fish were indeed used for divination by examining either its entrails or by discerning the future through its swimming patterns, in the same manner in which birds were used in the divination practice of augury, then this would be the link needed to identify the mermaid of the Middle Ages that was seen as a prophesying spellcaster. This is speculative I realize, but I feel that from an anthropological point of view this could indeed be the missing link needed to show an

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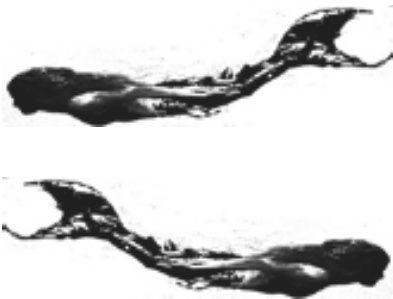
From around 100 B.C., depicting fish-bodied Atargatis, veiled, holding the egg, flanked by barley stalks. We can deduce that Atargatis initially had a naissance on land and was the cult figure for an agrarian way of life. All gods are produced out of various cultural influences and foreign interactions outside of a tribal cultus, so a mingling of diverse elements is not unexpected in the least. The egg seen in the imagery universally represents life and the barely stalks provided the essential ingredients in producing the staple of life—bread. But this goddess has the elements of the

ocean as well. Undoubtedly she is depicted with the lower torso of a fish to concretely illustrate her reign over both land and sea.

unbroken thought process that viewed the mermaid as a soothsayer.

Whatever the prophetic attributes of the religious practices associated with this goddess, it seems the priests were arrayed in dramatic flowing garments that were meant to give the impression of an aquatic dweller as their robes billowed in the breeze. Atargatis was a link between two contrasting worlds,

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and this connection had to be respected and appeased by the priests who were her chosen intermediaries. According to Nelson Glueck, in an article published in *American Journal of Archaeology*, there is a legend that states that in Atargatis' cultural centers, the eating of fish was strictly forbidden.

This taboo against eating certain prohibited foods is indeed seen in other cultures around the world, noticeably today in the Jewish and Muslim faiths and in the Roman Catholic practice of abstention during the season of Lent, but continuing with her oceanic motif, Atargatis was fearfully demonstrating that she held sway as she commanded all aspects of the sea. She had to be respected in our world so she may be beneficial to mankind in hers.

According to her accompanying origin mythos, this mermaid goddess decided to hide herself from the mortal world after she accidentally killed a

human being. We now have the nucleus of the tradition of the mermaid falling in love with a human. This motif can even be seen today in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. The moral of this story is unchecked passions often result in devastating tragedy. Coming out of a nature religion, Atargatis personifies the beauty of nature but also the terrible possibilities that the fury of nature can unleash. Atargatis fled from her sins to the protection of the sea, intending to hide her shame forever from her beloved mankind. Atargatis was an important fertility goddess, as was seen illustrated in her representation on the coin in which she was depicted holding an egg, but she also represented the darker forces of love and their potentially destructive power.

After diving below the water, the ocean accepted her as one of its own and transformed her magically into a fish. The sea, however, refused to hide her human beauty and did not transform the upper half of her body, which was unsurpassed feminine perfection. We see in this myth the duplicity of nature. This structuralistic approach demonstrates the human mind wrestling with the various seemingly conflicting aspects of the world in which they inhabited. This tale can be seen as representing self-imposed exile, forever giving up one's way of life as an everlasting penance. But also connected to this tale is that mermaids are intrinsically linked to tragic events. This myth is an attempt to explain not only the mermaid belief in the form of myth, but also to rectify the fickleness of the natural world.

Atargatis did not stay confined to the region of Mesopotamia. Indeed, her mermaid image was quite popular and she migrated outward and settled in shrines in many far-flung foreign lands. As the goddess Dea, this mermaid deity established a cult that reached as far as Britain. Thus we can catch





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glimpses and clues of the seeding of beliefs that would grow into the ubiqui-tous mermaid.

Later this mermaid goddess became identified with the Greek goddess Aphrodite, who was born from the sea and retained close connections with it, but she never lost her human form. As cultures create gods in their own image, and as the Greeks believed in the exaltation of the human form, Aphrodite's fish attributes were transferred to her escorts known as the Tritons.

Of course the civilizations of the ancient world did not reside in a vacuum.

The Greeks adopted some parts of a particular origin story, morphing one or more god or goddess into their goddess Aphrodite. The clearest example of true merfolk in Greek mythology was the son of Poseidon and Amphi-trite called Triton, who is most often shown as a half man and half fish, who blows a conch shell while riding the white-capped waves. This was an attendant to Aphrodite and a surviving link between Atargatis and this Greek goddess of love.

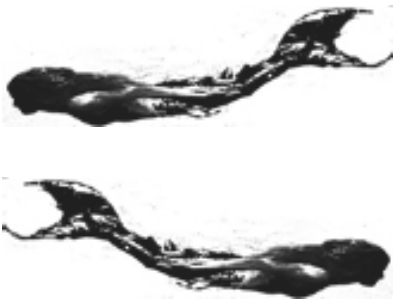
But the figures of Ea, Oannes, and Atargatis are by no means the only recognizable mermaid figures in the ancient world. The god known as Dagon is another interesting male fertility figure who evolved into a major Northwest Semitic god. Like Atargatis, Dagon has been interpreted by scholars as a melding of the symbol of grain, a long standing symbol of fertility, and the fish, which can be interpreted as representing creative multiplication and abundance. The historian H. Schmökel asserted that Dagon was never originally a fish-god, but once he became an important god of the maritime Canaanites known as the Phoenicians, the deity morphed into a god with aquatic attributes.

Dagon is illustrated as the stereotypical merman figure. And this god even swam into the Jewish imagination, finding its way into the Old Testament.

But the god known as Dagon was an evil deity that was to be destroyed by the conquering Hebrews at all costs. The writers of the Old Testament state that King Saul's head was displayed in a temple of Dagon. Such an outrageous sacrilege would not go unpunished.

In the Hebrew Bible, Dagon has been established as the god of the Philistines with temples at Beth-dagon, which translates as the House of Dagon, mentioned in Joshua 19:27. The Philistines were the inhabitants of the Promised Land and they had to be totally eliminated from the Hebraic manifest destiny. Judges 16:23 tells of this temple being destroyed by

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bas-relief of dagon - MuSée du louvre, PariS, franCe

This is the stereotypical image we now have of the mermaid, except, of course, for the Oriental headdress and the flowing curly beard and hair, which is the cultural aesthetic for the culture which produced it.

Samson as his last heroic act. In terms of mythological exegesis, this event demonstrates the old religion, portrayed by Dagon, being replaced by the new monotheistic religion. This is shown more implicitly in other accounts.

1 Samuel 5.2–7 relates how the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines and taken to Dagon's temple in Ashdod. The following morning, they found the image of Dagon lying prostrate before the ark. According to Steven Fine in his book *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology*, this story is depicted on the frescoes of the Dura-Europos synagogue, set opposite to a depiction of the High Priest Aaron and the Temple of Solomon. This is the pictorial representation of

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the supplantation of a former regional religion by the chosen people of the one, true God of the Hebrews.

Another temple consecrated to Dagon, this one found in Ashdod, was so important that it was mentioned in 1 Samuel 5.2–7 and again referred to as late as 1 Maccabees 10.83;11.4, which was a transition from the Old Testament into the New Testament. Reading between the lines we can clearly see that the old religion of Dagon would not go quietly.

But these various ancient deities that manifested different attributes were important to the earliest agricultural cultures and cultures dependent on the oceans and rivers for life. Nowhere else is this dependence on a river more clearly depicted than in the Egyptian reliance on the deified Nile River.

These gods and goddesses of the Nile were a combination of different forms, however they maintained their distinctly human visage so that they were recognizable and relatable. Many of these Egyptian gods' attributes found their way into the Greek mind, informing that culture with the many

attributes of the mermaid. No other culture on earth had the seamless ability to figuratively blend human and animal forms into a wholly new arrangement. This is blatantly obvious when looking at the pantheon of the Egyptian gods and goddesses. In this civilization that depended on the Nile for survival, the Egyptian cosmos was peopled with water gods that blended two aspects—one of the human and the other of an animal.

Khnum was one of the earliest Egyptian deities, originally the god of the source of the Nile River. Since the annual flooding of the Nile brought with it the essential silt and clay necessary for planting, and its water brought life to its surroundings, Khnum was thought to be the creator of life. As with all gods and goddesses that emerged from the water, the creative aspect was invariably emphasized.

While displaying no aquatic attributes, Khnum does display the melding of animal and human qualities. Egypt was a culture that embraced the combination of forms. Khnum shows the head of a goat, an animal regarded as lascivious in the ancient world. This overt sexuality is fitting for a fertility god.

Khnum later was described as having fashioned the other deities, earning the title of Lord of Created Things. Here we see the creative elements found in the god Ea, as well as the retention on this creative god bestowing the arts on mankind. In art, Khnum was usually depicted as a ram-headed man at a

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The representation of the goat's head implies a relentless creative force as goats were seen as lascivious creatures.

baS-relief

of Khnu

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potter's wheel, although he also appeared in his earlier guise as a water-god, holding a jar from which flowed a stream of water.

Statue of nePhthyS - MuSée du louvre, PariS, franCe

Nephthys is an Egyptian goddess associated with water. She is overtly feminine and wholly human. On her head, she wears the figure of a house. This goddess shows the evolution into recognizable figures personifying natural forces. This will evolve further in the Greek culture.

Nephthys was the goddess of rivers and lamentation. Her attribute of mourning may parallel the iconography of flowing water as an imitation of shedding tears. In the funerary role that was of such importance in the Egyp-

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tian cultic beliefs, the goddess Nephthys often was depicted as a bird called a kite, or as a woman with falcon wings, usually outstretched as a symbol of enveloping protection. It is believed that Nephthys's association with the kite or the Egyptian hawk, which possesses a piercing, mournful cry, evidently reminded the ancients of the lamentations usually offered for the dead by wailing women. Again, as with other sea deities, we see this avian parallel to the water. Also, out of this Egyptian myth, we can start seeing glimpses of the mermaid who mournfully sings, luring ships into the rocks through these beaconing cries.

Indeed, to the ancient Egyptians, Nephthys was associated with death.

Nephthys was viewed as a crucial force of heavenly transition, for it was believed that the Pharaoh became strong for his journey to the afterlife through the intervention of Nephthys. The same divine power could be applied later to all of the dead, who were advised to consider Nephthys a necessary companion. According to ancient Egyptian texts, Nephthys was a force before whom demons trembled in fear, and who was capable of casting magical spells. This is the earliest instance I could find of magic in relation to a deity out of which the mermaid would form. This attribute will be explored later in the chapter on mermaid belief in the Middle Ages.

Hapi was the god of the annual flooding of the Nile in ancient Egyptian religion. The flood deposited rich fertile soil, known as silt, on the river's banks, allowing the Egyptians to grow crops. Some of the titles for Hapi were "Lord of the Fish and Birds of the Marshes" and "Lord of the River Bringing Vegetation." Hapi is typically depicted as an intersex person with a large belly and pendulous breasts. While fully masculine in form, Hapi also maintains the body of a pregnant woman.

The annual flooding of the Nile was referred to as the Arrival of Hapi.

Since this flooding provided fertile soil in an area that was otherwise desert, Hapi symbolized fertility. He had large female breasts because he was said to bring a rich and nourishing harvest. Due to his fertile nature he was sometimes considered the "father of the gods," an attribute seen in the god Ea as well. Hapi also was said to order the cosmos in a harmonious system of order.

While this sampling of the immense Egyptian pantheon does not necessarily include the stereotypical mermaid figure, it does indeed inform cultures







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Statue of haPi - vatiCan MuSeuM, roMe, italy

Hapi, the male god of fertility. He wears the royal headdress called the nemes, and the Pharaonic false beard known as the pastiche. Usually Hapi is portrayed as having a swollen stomach indicating pregnancy. This god may very well be seen as an early example of the subjugation of women. Even the nursing nipples of the female is usurped. We shall see in a later chapter how the mermaid evolved into the image representing the subjugated female.

within its vast sphere of influence, lending attributes to already existing gods and goddesses that would add elements to the idea of the mermaid mythology. As these myths about mermaids developed and congealed, spreading across the Classical world, various cultures borrowed from their predeces-

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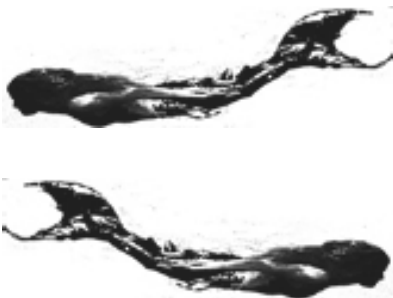
sors and attributed differing traits to them, sometimes creating creatures with vastly different attitudes toward the land-loving mortals.

The Greeks, for example, feared mermaids. The figure that would eventually evolve into the oceanic mermaid was initially referred to as sirens. Science retains this name in the classification system that includes the mammals classified as dugongs and manatees, aquatic mammals which mainstream science point to as the reason behind mermaid sightings made by sailors who were out to sea for far too long. In Greek thought, however, sirens appeared as a blend of the human shape and that of birds. Sirens were

believed to combine women and birds in various ways that shape shifted in its development. In early Greek art, sirens were represented as birds with large women's heads, adorned with plumage and armed with scaly feet. Later, they were evolved out of an overtly avian form and were represented as female figures with the legs of birds, with or without wings, playing a variety of musical instruments, especially harps. The 10th-century A.D. Byzantine encyclopedia known as the *Suda* says that from their chests up sirens had the form of sparrows, but below the waist they were women, or, alternatively, that they were little birds with women's faces. Birds were chosen because of their beautiful voices. Although the *Suda* was a medieval compendium of world knowledge, it at least attests to the prevalent understanding of folklore in the medieval period and is a commentary on Classical mythology that is of great importance to scholars.

Later, Sirens were sometimes depicted as alluring women, whose tempting bodies, not only their voices, are seductive. These sirens were feminine creatures yet quite dangerous in their hidden nature, who lured sailors into sea with their songs and drowned them. The Greeks were a seafaring culture, so of course venturing out onto the ocean with a course aimed into the blue horizon on a wooden ship was fraught with all kinds of inherent peril. Sirens, then, were the perfect boogie-man for the sea. And the ocean is indeed in and of itself a siren's song—alluring and undeniably unforgiving. And like the sea, the siren's very nature appeared pleasant but could instantly turn deadly. Similar superstitions were present later in the British Isles where sailors regarded mermaids, sirens and sea nymphs as evil spirits of the sea and bad omens.

Like the Nephthys of Egyptian lore, mermaids were still evolving as soothsayers, prophesying death on the sea. In the *Iliad*, the companion piece to 40



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Homer's *Odyssey*, the character of the Old Man of the Sea is the father of the nereids. He was gifted with the power of prophecy, who would aid heroes if called upon. It is recorded in a papyrus scroll that Alexander the Great paused at the Syrian seashore before the climacteric battle of Issus in 333 BC, and prayed, "calling on Thetis, Nereus and the Nereids, nymphs of the sea." This prophetic nature would become an attribute of the mermaid.

Like witnessing a banshee, sighting a mermaid represented the coming of the storm, sinking of the ship and almost always eventual death of the person who saw them.

These creatures of the sea could indeed predict future occurrences because often times they directly interfered with human events. They could predict tragedy because they created the circumstances of that tragedy. In no other work of Classical literature is this notion of sirens being dangerous yet alluring with their tempting song more blatantly illustrated than in the epic poem, *Odyssey*.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the poet tells of mermaid-like sirens encountered along the hero's sea voyages in the Mediterranean. As Jane Ellen Harrison notes in her treatise, *The Ker as Siren*: "It is strange and beautiful that Homer should make the Sirens appeal to the spirit, not to the flesh." The siren song is a promise to Odysseus of mantic truths; with a false promise that he will live to tell them, they sing:

*Once he hears to his heart's content, sails on, a wiser
man.*

*We know all the pains that the Greeks and Trojans
once endured*

*on the spreading plain of Troy when the gods willed it
so—*

all that comes to pass on the fertile earth, we know it

all!

“They are mantic creatures like the Sphinx with whom they have much in common, knowing both the past and the future,” Harrison observed.

“Their song takes effect at midday, in a windless calm. The end of that song is death.”

The hero Odysseus lashed himself to the ship mast so as not to jump into the sea and swim to the tempting sirens, drowning in the attempt. The crew

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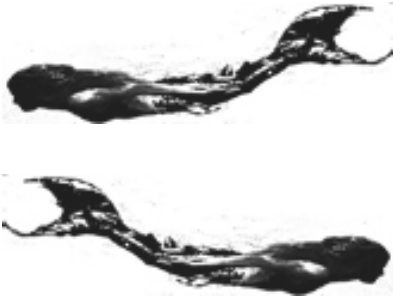


RONALD L. MURPHY, JR.

the Siren vaSe - britiSh MuSeuM, london, england

In this Greek red figure ware, the Sirens assault Odysseus by swooping in, hoping to beckon him to drown by their song. At this point, sirens have not yet been synonymous with the mermaid. Indeed, these sirens are terrestrial creatures that live on rock outcrops in the sea. We have the close association with the ocean, but the siren is not aquatic. Not yet.

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ON MERMAIDS

stuff wax in their ears so as not to steer the ship to its demise on the rocks.

Odysseus wants to experience the siren, but not physically give in to them.

He knows the true nature of these alluring creatures. Like the goddess Nephthys of the Egyptian pantheon, we are seeing that sirens are taking on the role of bringer of death.

‘ulySSeS and the SirenS’ by herbert JaMeS draPer, C. 1909.

ferenS art gallery, KingSton-uPon-hull, england

While a more modern take on the Homeric incident, the artist demonstrates quite intensely the maddening effect on the hero as he stares in wide-eyed

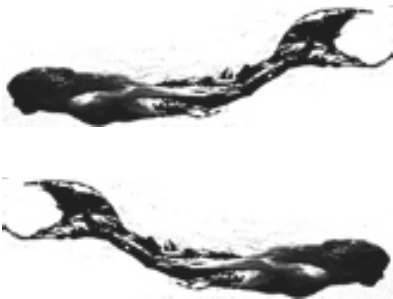
abandon.

His tethers are the only thing saving him from a certain death under the waves.

Notice too how the artist depicts the sirens as femme fatales in human form and as a mermaid as well, an artistic nod to the various traditions associated with the sirens.

This is an attribute of bodies of water, where death was in the job description of a sailor, and these entities are personified thusly. A popular Greek legend turned Alexander the Great's sister, Thessaloniki, into a mermaid after her death. She was said to live in the Aegean. She would ask the sailors on any ship she would encounter only one question: "Is King Alexander

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alive?" to which the correct answer was: "He lives and reigns and conquers the world." This answer would please her, and she would accordingly calm the waters and bid the ship farewell. Any other answer would enrage her, and she would stir up a terrible storm, dooming the ship and every sailor on board.

As we have seen, the sirens were portrayed as dangerous yet beautiful creatures, who lured nearby sailors with their enchanting music and voices to shipwreck on the rocky coast of their island. The mermaid has now come from a shamanistic portrayal of nature in rock art, deified as a goddess in

many cultures throughout the Near East and Europe, and now has taken on the trait of temptress. Now we must examine the mermaid attributes that morph out of the mythos of the love goddesses. It is out of this milieu that the mermaid becomes a being that can tempt a human with feigned love, but giving in to this perceived love—which, in fact, was physical, bestial lust—meant certain doom, both literally and figuratively. Atargatis hinted at this when she was transformed into a water-dwelling entity over the tragic consequences brought on by the emotion of love. And like Atargatis, the Greek goddess Aphrodite was also sprung initially from a fertility goddess.

Aphrodite was prayed to by the Greeks in hopes of fair sailing, and her companion was the sacred dolphin. Aphrodite was associated with, and often depicted with, the sea, dolphins, clams, scallop shells, and pearls. She was portrayed as the counterpoint of the sirens, which were the baser elements of the sea. She was intelligence. She was the beauty of the sea in its placid form. She was the sea that gave life. Many of the symbols associated with Aphrodite were also absorbed by the Roman goddess Venus.

In Roman art, Venus was seen riding the waves in a shell like her predecessor Aphrodite. “Venus Physica” was one of the many epithets said of Venus in the Roman world. This name implies that Venus was a universal, natural and creative force that informs the physical world. This is in direct correlation with the San culture that saw the mermaid as being the personification of the forces of water. Roman theology further expands on this connection with the water, emphasizing Venus as the yielding, watery female principle, essential to the generation and balance of life. Thus Venus is now the sexual nature of creation as well.

Venus absorbs and tempers the male essence, which is martial and fiery, uniting the opposites of male and female in mutual affection. Like the sea,





ON MERMAIDS

she has the power to put out the symbolic fires of human passions.

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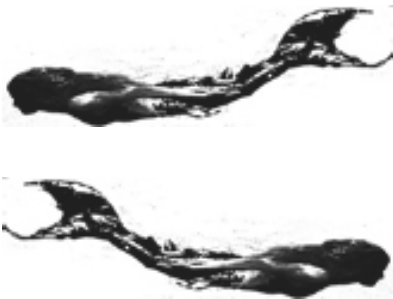
Renaissance of earth of

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stunning A while is more Aphrodite than Roma shape. She is beautiful, she wears the long flowing hair, and she is from the sea.

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RONALD L. MURPHY, JR.

royal chaise lounge. She is tempting and in control, comfortable in her watery element. This Roman fresco

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As we have seen, the mermaid was identified as a female figure with a fish tail that gradually evolved into a purely human form with the fish attributes seen in her escorts. She never quite loses all aspects of the sea, retaining many motifs as ancillary forms. But in the Classical Greco-Roman world, the perfect human body was the highest standard, there was no need for

mixed metaphor. So the mermaid has lost its tail while gathering characteristics of the tempting and alluring beautiful woman that can lead a man to disaster if care is not taken. The Roman world, for all its practicality, synchronized much of Greek thought. However, it did expound intellectually on the nature of the mermaid. The first-century Roman historian Pliny the Elder, who lived between AD 23-79, wrote of the mermaid in his scientific treatise, *Natural History*, which was an authority on scientific matters through the Middle Ages. In typical highbrow fashion of pragmatic, educated skepticism, Pliny discounted Sirens as pure fable. However, before concluding this stance, the writer had to make this qualification: “although Dinon, the father of Clearchus, a celebrated writer, asserts that they exist in India, and that they charm men by their song, and, having first lulled them to sleep, tear them to pieces.” While Pliny will not take credit for the claim, he annotates a sighting by naming a source. Pliny the Elder also writes about nereids as women with rough, scaly bodies like fish. They are seen often “sitting upon dolphins,” in some cases, he writes in *Natural History*.

Pliny describes how an official to Gaul wrote to the Emperor Augustus about “a considerable number of nereids” being “found dead upon the seashore.” Further Pliny adds, “I have, too, some distinguished informants of equestrian rank, who state that they themselves once saw in the ocean of Gades a sea-man.” As a rational man of science, it seems Pliny is covering all the bases just in case mermaids did indeed exist. Nothing wrong with hedging one’s bets. After all, when dealing with the unexplained one must take note of all sightings and record all incidents.

Now let us leave the ancient and Classical world behind and sail over the seas of time and disembark on the shores of the Middle Ages. Even cartographers of this age included mermaids on their maps. And, believe it or not, mermaids were also a part of the medieval church!





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The Medieval Mermaid

At the onset of the gradual fall of the Roman Empire, as the old gods and goddess of the establishment were steadily supplanted by the Christian faith, the period now referred to as the Dark Ages would blow out the candle of the Classical period that had shined its brilliance on the Western world since the 5th century BC, beginning with the civilization of the ancient Greeks. But before the last gasp of this epoch, we do find a serious study on the nature of the mermaid. And this study would inform us further still on the character of this enigmatic creature.

In the 5th century AD, around the time the historical King Arthur was uniting disparate tribes in Brittania, we have the writing of the book *Physiologus*, which is said to have been written or, at least, compiled in Greek.

This bestiary is a good place to start because it is a link between the Classical thought of the Greco-Roman tradition and an indication that a new age was on the horizon; this treatise on nature is a bridge between two very incongruent worlds. In this book, *Physiologus*, which deals with the knowledge of the life sciences, there is a portion dedicated to “The Nature of the Mermaid.” The following from this passage bestiary was translated by Mary Allyson Armistead and reads thusly:

In the sea there are many marvels.

The mermaid is like a maiden:

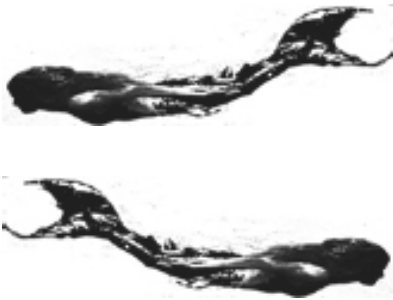
In breast and body she is thus joined:

From the navel downward she is not like a maid

But a fish very certainly with sprouted fins.

This marvel dwells in an unstable place where the water subsides.

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*She sinks ships and causes suffering,
She sings sweetly —this siren—and has many voices,
Many and resonant, but they are very dangerous.
Sailors forget their steering because of her singing;
They slumber and sleep and wake too late,
And the ships sink in a whirlpool and cannot surface
anymore
But wise and wary men are able to return;
Often they escape with all the strength they have.
They have said of this siren, that she is so grotesque,
Half maid and half fish: something is meant by this.*

In this brief entry, we find a description of the creature we would immediately recognize as the mermaid. But in the concluding line we have the in-triguing statement: “something is meant by this.” And surely that is the case.

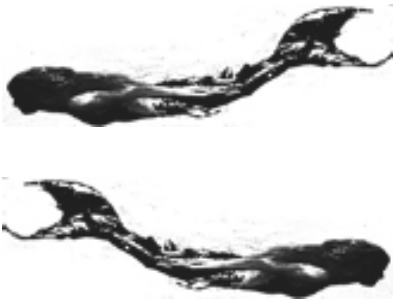
For in the Middle Ages we have the most developed notion of the mermaid, but we also must view this creature through the lens of allegory. Something is to be learned of this creature’s existence. It is all in God’s plan.

The Middle Ages was a time when the ever shifting notion of the nature of the mermaid began to congeal into the idea that we know today, of a beautiful woman with luxuriant hair who is a scaly fish from the torso downwards, ending in the fan of a lavish tail. This era is nearly the end in the mermaids’

phenotypical evolution. But it is the past in which the mermaid is so anchored that we must continually recall her heritage. As the past informs the future, we must return once again to the Greco-Roman world which provided the traditions for many aspects of the Western World which it illuminated, leading eventually to the Renaissance, or the rebirth of ancient learning. The mermaid was to be reborn in this era as well, as we shall read in the next chapter.

The Medieval period has been called, and rightly so, the Age of Faith. It was a time of apocalyptic expectations. God was indeed in the details. The observational approach to nature, called the doctrine of signatures, was a means by which to deduce healing properties of herbs from their forms.

This doctrine was extended to the animal world as well. Thus, in the words of my esteemed University of Pittsburgh professor, H. David Brumble, the physical appearance of every living thing was an outward manifestation of its inward spiritual state. The mermaid, an unabashedly naked siren tempt-



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ing sailors to their death, was at first viewed as a demonic enchantress, a prophesizing witch, seducing young heroic sailors from the chastity of their ships into the perilous chaos of the ocean's damning void. The people of the Middle Ages certainly knew of the gods and goddesses of the pagan world. London, in fact, was once a Roman outpost with many temples erected to honor a host of gods and goddesses. But as the conquering religion and the dogma of the Church attempted to control all facets of life, these Classical beliefs were referred to in order to illustrate the latent morality in the tales. The work of Neoplatonic philosophy was an important aspect of burgeoning Christianity. This school of thought had its roots in pagan principles, most notably in the philosophical school of thought expounded by Plato in 5th century BC Athens, but it was to be an indisputable link between the old worldview populated by copious anthropomorphic deities and the new world order of rigid monotheism. What better bridge to build between these two seemingly incompatible worldviews than on the foundation of Plato himself? Beginning in the 3rd century after Christ, the tenets of Neoplatonism informed Christian thought throughout the early medieval period. Neoplatonism involved describing the derivation of the whole of reality from a single principle, "the One". Thus every aspect of this world is a mere shadow of the ultimate truth.

There was good and evil out there, and this precursor to the doctrine of signatures alluded to this veracity. We can actually see these conflicting forces at work in the natural world. This structuralism impacts how we view reality. Later, Carl Jung would also observe "A symbol always stands for something more than its obvious and immediate meaning." The mermaid would indeed become a symbol for the extremes of the human condition within the medieval world. This Neoplatonic allegorical view of the natural

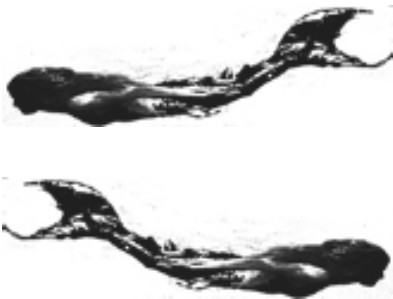
world would allow us to see the mermaid as a symbol of feminine evil and later as a symbol for our salvation.

Unquestionably, at the onset and still somewhat even to this very day, a major focus was on the mermaid's sexuality. The fecundity of the goddess in the ancient world had no place in the Christian landscape that urged control over sexual passions. We are intelligent beings, after all, created in God's own image. We are not to act as beasts; reason must rein in our passions.

Thus, the mermaid was the poster child for rampant sexuality that needed to be avoided at all costs in order to stave off the flames of eternal damnation.

The goddess of old, once worshipped as patron of the seafarer, was now cast

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as a villain, a teaching device whose only evil desire was to lead the Christian soul away from Christ and into sin and temptation. The mermaid as siren symbol was used by the Medieval Church as embodying the lure of fleshy pleasures to be shunned by the God-fearing penitent. The mermaid thus became a victim of the repressive sexual attitudes of the Christian Church.

Mermaid carvings figured prominently in church decorations in the Middle Ages to symbolically serve as a vivid reminder of the fatal temptations of the flesh. These insatiable soul-eaters, the enduring legacy of the

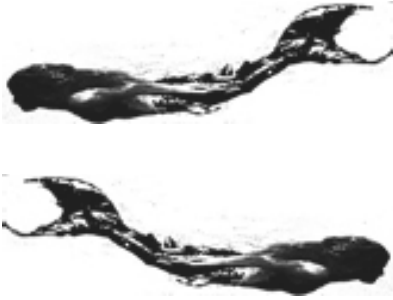
cannibalistic sirens quite obvious, were of course not considered to have souls of their own and as a result the legends of the mermaids anxious to acquire souls arose. The Christian Church, in preaching these notions that mermaids were demonic temptresses who had no souls of their own was actually stating deeply-held beliefs about all women in order to support male domination.

These roots can be traced back to the temple slaves who had to submit to men as a means of worship essential to the cults of Aphrodite and, later, to Venus. The medieval mermaid emphasized the supposed faithlessness and inconstancy of women, the danger of their attraction, and the unlikelihood of their gaining humanity. The mermaid was personification of the wanton and wild abandon of the ocean. The ocean's creative aspect now became a sinful sexuality. Fecundity was now tinged with the sins of impure thoughts.

The popularity of the medieval mermaid continued and in the Middle Ages the church decided to do something about it. They changed the mermaid into a symbol of lust and temptation. The story of Odysseus and the sirens was changed so that the sirens were now mermaids. Odysseus' ship was a symbol of the church, and its mast the cross of Jesus. The mermaids were the temptations that call men away from the church.

Like the Last Judgment carvings that topped the eastern entrance to many churches, reminding the parishioner's the fate that awaited the unrepentant, mermaids, in their own right, were carved reminders of the sin that could send an unwary Christian to hell. Mermaids had, of course, evolved out of the love goddess tradition of the Greco-Roman tradition, but now these creatures were overtly sexualized by the medieval Catholic Church and categorized as spellcasting witches.

Love goddesses have always had the element of physical love attached to them. One aspect of the cult of Aphrodite was the practice of ritual prostitution in her shrines and within her temples. She was the goddess of love who arose from the sea, accompanied by her mermen attendants, but love also



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had the inherent element of sexuality. The euphemism in Greek for this holy prostitute is “hierodoule,” the meaning of which is “sacred slave.” For all intents and purposes, the female is now cast in a position subservient to the male, even in a religion presided over by a goddess. This subjugation would, alas, not end here, as we shall see. The goddess’s festival, known as the Aphrodesia, was celebrated across Greece, but particularly in Athens and Corinth. It is easy to see where the word aphrodisiac, meaning to induce sexual interest and energy, comes from. At the temple of Aphrodite on the summit of Acrocorinth, for instance, which was built before the Roman destruction of the city in 146 BC, intercourse with her priestesses was considered a preferred method of worshipping Aphrodite. I doubt if many men had to be dragged to church services during this period in history.

Many of the Greek goddess Aphrodite’s attributes were eventually syncretized by the conquering Romans into their goddess Venus. This blended goddess continued to employ sexuality as a means of worship. Our word “venereal,” which has an unhealthy, negative connotation, comes from the name of Venus. This term may well have sprung from the adverse conditions derived from the fertility rituals that likely continued throughout the Roman world in celebration of this popular goddess. Considering Julius Caesar invaded Britain in 55 B.C., this cult certainly travelled with his legions and undoubtedly implanted itself in the lands between the Roman capitol in Italy and the United Kingdom. And the aspect of Venus and her association with the sea was transferred to the mermaid lore that abounded in the British Isles.

And it is in the United Kingdom where our journey into the medieval mermaid will be particularly focused. I have studied cryptids in England

extensively, from fairies in the south of England to the Grey Man and the aquatic monster of the Loch in the misty Scottish Highlands. But my affinity to England and the British Isles in its entirety is much deeper than investigations into the unexplained. The English language is the very language in which we shape our thoughts. It is linguistically from this region that we derive the very name of the mermaid. The principle of linguistic relativity holds that the structure of a language affects its speakers' worldview or cognition.

Words have meaning and the more layered a language the more we can interact with our concept of reality. Popularly known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the principle is often defined to include two versions. A main point of debate in the discussion of linguistic relativity is the correlation be-

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tween language and thought. The strongest form of correlation is linguistic determinism, which maintains that language entirely determines the range of possible cognitive processes of an individual. Without being able to name something or to express a concept in terms of words, the cognitive reality of this particular attribute of the world doesn't exist to the viewer.

Essentialism is the view that, for any specific entity, such as an animal, a group of people, a concept, or, say, a mermaid, there is a set of attributes which are necessary to its identity and function. We receive a stimulus and we identify it by applying our ideas of its reality to it. Language shapes our thoughts and interactions with the tangible and intangible of this world. I have always held my language as a sacred gift. And to me and to most reading this book, that gift is based upon an English tradition. And it is out

of the English tradition that the essentialism of the mermaid takes shape, present even to this very day. England borrowed from the old views of this creature and formed it, molding it until it became what it is today. This, in turn, informs us because our language transmits these shared views to us. If you hear the word “mermaid,” what do you see? The image is based on shared concepts transmitted by language, thus forming an archetypal abstract.

There are several reasons why the British Isles and its native tongue was at the forefront in the formation of the completed mermaid mythology. It was in the United Kingdom that we find a land where burgeoning Christian ideals mingled with ancient pagan ideology concerning the nature of the world.

England and Scotland had Roman settlements that brought rituals involving mermaid type beings that were easily synchronized with traditional beliefs in water dwelling humanoids. But there was a clash as Christianity took root and grew into an all-encompassing dogma. What would become of the bare-breasted mermaid of old? What about the aspect of fertility implicit in her personification? These were questions that were answered in carved church decorations and illuminated in manuscripts by bending monks. Mermaids had a place in the medieval world, but it wasn't the honored dais that they were accustomed to. No longer celebrated and worshipped for their fecundity; indeed, now they were feminine trollops grouped with witches in the sensibilities of the medieval imagination. One further twist the church gave to the medieval mermaid's tale, was to say that mermaids did not have souls.

The only way for a mermaid to get a soul was to steal it from men. Thus a mermaid tempts a man to steal his soul. The story of the medieval mermaid is the story of the clash between Christianity and Paganism. When the early





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Christians came to Northern Europe, they found people worshipping different gods. They converted the people to Christianity and they converted some of their gods into Christian saints. The old gods continued to exist in folklore as ogres, giants, fairies, other monsters and, of course, in the guise of the mermaid.

But the United Kingdom also was at the crossroads in the creation of the mermaid mythos because of its very location. It is an island, and many of its inhabitants are necessary seafarers. In an article entitled “The Medieval Mermaid,” the author, Vincent Carlucci, creatively states that the “merry” in “Merry Olde England” does not refer to happiness but to mermaids. Well, more accurately, to the sea, but this is the root for mermaid. Merry, in Old English, means the sea. The old name for mermaids was “merrymaids.”

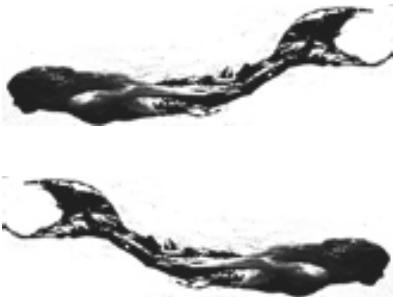
This could be true, but I suspect that the term merry here simply means the sea, and that “Merry Olde England” just refers to England being surrounded by the sea. But it nevertheless informs our perception of a world dependent and intrinsically linked to the ocean.

Because of superstitions inherited by sailors throughout the centuries, mermaids appear in British folklore as unlucky omens, both foretelling disaster and provoking it. The very sighting of a mermaid can be a portent of approaching rough weather. In this medieval English lore, mermaids were thought to be breathtakingly beautiful, seductive and, of course, unquestionably dangerous. As was the mermaid from millennia past, this creature was still the personification of the sea. Ship figureheads were sometimes carved in the shape of mermaids. Some sailors also carved mermaids from walrus ivory and whale teeth, but many avoided carving mermaids, fearing they would bring bad luck. This is a carryover of the sympathetic magic used in cave art during the Paleolithic period and a reminder that the idea of the collective unconscious is an important concept

as we study the world of the unexplained. By studying archetypes, we can get to the germination point of an idea.

So we find that England was at a unique intersection in the melding of pagan and Christian thought as the Roman Empire fell and a medieval understanding of the world eventually built itself on the rubble. And because it is an island, England was dependent on the seas. But there is one more aspect that we shall examine. As England was Christianized, the dogmatic religion had to have its bastions and strongholds. The Roman Catholic Church,

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after all, saw itself in a literal war with outside influences. These castles of the faith were embodied in the dominating, and at times foreboding, artifice of the church and cathedral. And it is in these churches, which were arrayed to teach Catholic virtues to a mostly illiterate populous, that we find among the statues and stained glass representations of saints and angels, the images of the mermaid.

MiSeriCord Carving C. 1477 - St. laurenCe ChurCh, ludlow, england

Carved on a choir bench, this mermaid is voluptuous and tempting, bare-breasted, arms open. She is not the demure Aphrodite seen in the image of Botticelli.

She is the Venus of the sea, her attendants aquatic grotesques.

So it should not be viewed as strange that a major part of the story of the medieval mermaid is their images are fairly common in churches of the Middle Ages. They were part of the usual depictions of temptations and other vices that men were to resist. In the end, the church became an important time capsule for the very images it tried to suppress.

The Norman chapel in Durham Castle, built around 1078 by Saxon

stonemasons shortly after the invasion of the Normans at Hastings, has what is probably the earliest artistic depiction of a mermaid in England. It can be seen on a south-facing capital above one of the original Norman stone pil-lars.

But this carving of the mermaid is important for another reason as well. It appears as if she is combing her hair. Combing hair, especially long flowing tresses, is nothing out of the ordinary today. But to the medieval imagina-





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Pillar Capital C. 1078 - Durham Castle, Durham, England

The Norman Chapel mermaid holding a mirror and hairbrush.

tion, this mundane domestic female practice can be inferred as being subverted as an act of prideful perversion and, in time, evolved as an act of veritable witchcraft. To the medieval imagination, the mermaid was a demonic siren, luring the wary into the pits of Hell. The negative connotation of the word siren still exists today. Even now a siren is a woman who tempts men away from their duty to wife, family and church. Part of this propaganda of the Church was a reinterpretation of the mermaids traditional symbols: the comb and mirror. Now these mundane

domestic articles were equated with magic. In many carvings of the mermaid found in the churches of the middle ages, she holds in her hand the mirror, an object often associated with the divination practice known as scrying. This mermaid in a church is appropriate—she is the embodiment of what a Christian should not succumb to. She is no longer a representation of a primitive fertility figure. Indeed, she is a sexual pagan spirit out to eat souls. The medieval observer would see her as a personification of lust, one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Not only was lust apparent, now this mermaid figure was seen as a soothsayer, a violation of Church law. The mermaid was an emblem for every kind of vice not to undertake. We must stay firmly grounded in the terra firma of the Word of God and not venture into her watery realm that can quickly toss us under

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and sweep us away.

According to curator and lecturer Patricia Radnor, of Oklahoma State University, the mermaid's seemingly innocent act of combing her hair was believed to be a latent symbol that was a form of spell-casting or magic-making. Walter states that in the very act of combing her hair, the mermaid was viewed as drawing strength and power to herself. So, in this assertion, images of mermaids with combs seem to be a clear reference to the casting of a spell. Barbara Walter, author of *The Women's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*, states: "Certainly a woman's hair was seen as potent source of feminine power. One need go no further than tales of Medusa and Rapunzel to see this." Hair, then, is associated with vital female forces.

But the vitality of the attributes of the female was subjugated by the rituals of the medieval Catholic church. From Patricia Radford we learn in her article, *Lusty Ladies: Mermaids in the Medieval Irish Church*, that the hair of the medieval priest or Bishop was ritually combed several times during divine service by one of the inferior clergy. The comb is mentioned as one of the essential tools for use during a high medieval mass when sung by a Bishop, and in England these ritual combs were considered among the coveted possessions in the coffers of regional churches. Indeed, many ornate ceremonial or liturgical combs have been identified as associated with bishops and even with saints. Some of these combs were made of ivory while others were intricately carved or lavishly adorned with precious stones.

Among the combs specifically known to history is the one of St. Cuthbert at Durham Cathedral, where, interestingly enough, quite possibly the earliest artistic representation of a mermaid combing her hair is found. But it is just not this one example; mermaids are often depicted as holding combs made of fish bones. In the article *Mermaid Meaning and Symbolism*, the author Avia Venefica maintains this attribute has been inferred as an ancient nautical symbol of power over nature as sailors believed fish bones could divine or control storms at sea.

The mermaid was indeed cast as a creature of sublime powers. Researcher Barbara Walter continues to elucidate further: “From sundry references in old legends to the use of the comb in divination, and from its appearance in combination with pagan emblems on rudely sculptured stones in various parts of Scotland, it seems probable that this was one of the objects of pagan veneration which early Christian teachers deemed to be prudent to adopt,





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investing it with some new significance.” It appears that the comb was one of the few possessions owned by senior members of the clergy. In some cases, the comb has a small hole, suggesting that these combs may have been worn around the neck or attached to vestments. The comb in church ritual seems to have the same function as the pagan magic wand that the early Catholic Church so eagerly issued pogroms against. But it may be that the native priests in medieval England saw themselves as a direct descendent in the lineage of the Druid and the romanticized magic of an imagined English past was imbued into the ritual of the Catholic Mass. This is recognizable when considering the comb. There seems to be a uniquely pagan element imbedded in this ritual, and this unchristian element may have been transferred onto the mermaid, who acts as a handy scapegoat.

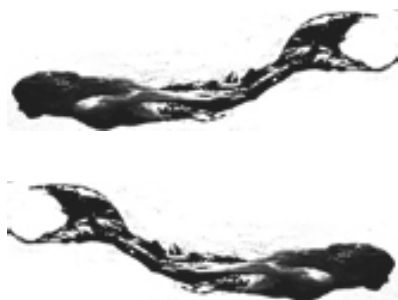
In European folk traditions where the comb appears as a magical object, the mermaid is often depicted combing her hair while gazing into a hand mirror. In Ireland, banshees, female spirits whose appearance signals a forthcoming death, also possess combs. The mermaid’s combs and the act of combing therefore seem to be associated with females from the otherworld and possess magical qualities relating to supernatural control or otherworldly, esoteric knowledge. If we regard the mirror as providing a portal into the otherworld, with the reflection literally a window into that world, and the comb or the act of combing as part of the process of divination, then the purpose of these two symbols become more focused. The mermaid is divining the future, perhaps foretelling a specific event using the mirror and passing that esoteric message from the otherworld to our own. As we shall see, the mirror as well as the comb is another attribute that is firmly affixed into mermaid lore. It too has profound magical symbolism and further casts the mermaid as a magical being capable of influencing the human world.

The mirror has had a long tradition of being an important part in obtaining oracles.

The Greek word for mirror divination is catoptromancy. From the article “The Psychomanteum and Near-Death Experience,” printed in *Chimeral Insight*, we find a description of the use of the mirror in this kind of magic.

The author, Robin Rickards, states that before the Temple of Ceres at Patras in ancient Greece, there was a fountain, separated from the temple by a wall. There is a universal element to magic in that it is best performed away from uninitiated onlookers. There, at the fountain, was an oracle. The person seeking answers let down a mirror, suspended by a thread, until its base

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touched the surface of the water. A mirror is a kind of crystalized fountain, its surface like that of the water. Here we have a correlation in the Classical world with oracles and the water. As the mermaid’s element is the water, this skill of prophesy has been transferred to her.

This attribute of soothsaying is strictly forbidden in the Bible. Leviticus 20:6 states: “If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I [God] will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people.” The mermaid is specifically and literally separated from our world, excommunicated because of her wantonness and because of her function as a magic-worker. The Latin word for mirror, which would have been used in the Middle Ages, is “speculum,” from which gives us the infinitive verb “to speculate.” Originally, the act of speculation was scanning the sky and the related movement of the stars by means of a

mirror. It naturally follows, then, that mirrors, as reflecting surfaces, should be the basis of symbolism relating to knowledge. But some knowledge was deemed as damned.

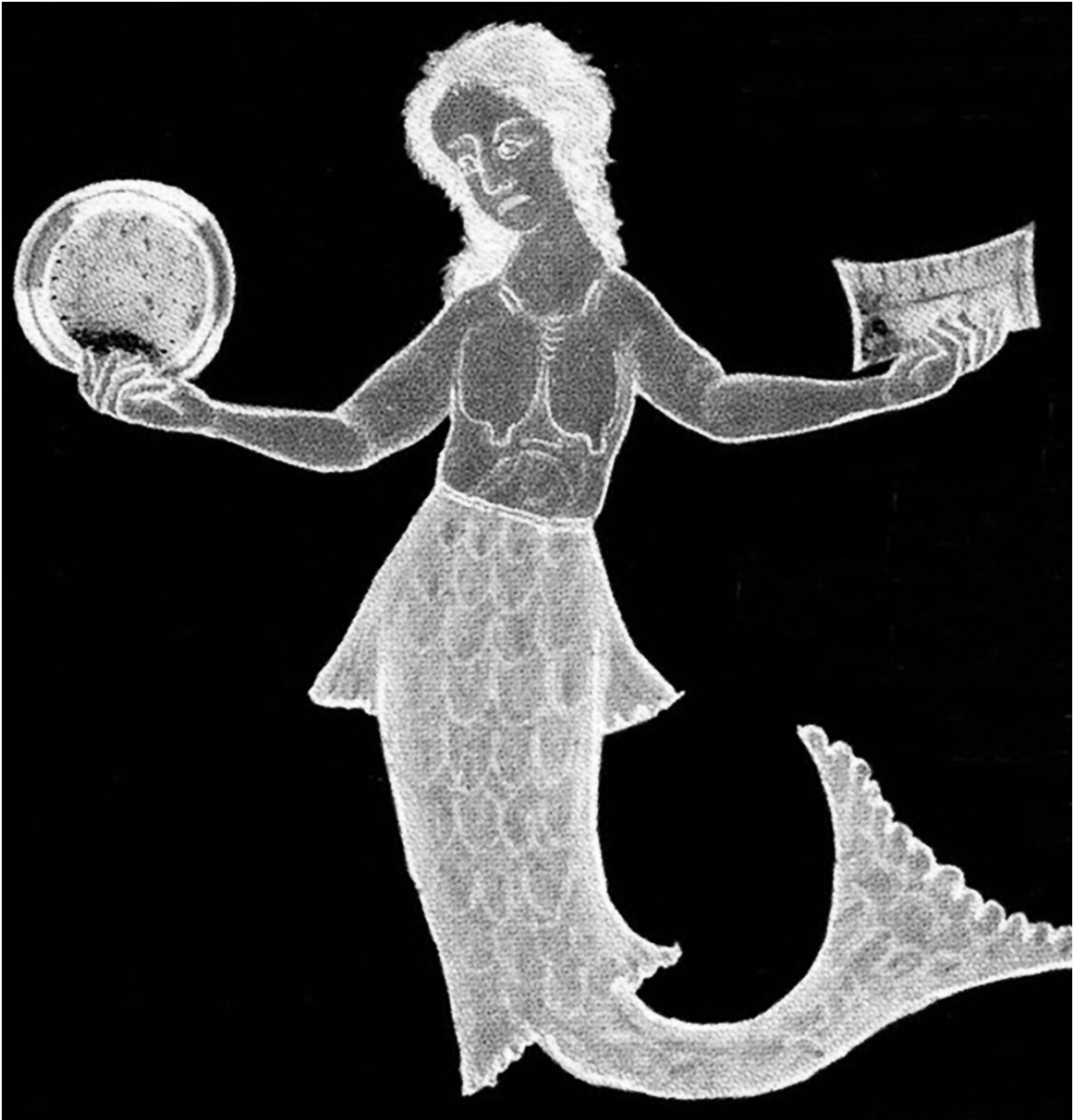
In Jack Tresidder's *Dictionary of Symbols*, the entry for "Mirror" states the following: "Almost everywhere, mirrors have been linked with magic and especially with divination because they can reflect past or future events as well as present ones." *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* includes this note: "The use of the mirror is one of the oldest forms of divination." *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* goes on to assert that the Muslim world also seems to have viewed the mirror as more than just an object to reflect a person's image. "The magic mirror which enables its user to see past, present and future is, in any case, a classic theme of Muslim literature."

This same basic theme of mirrors, divination, and magic seems to be nearly universal throughout Europe and Asia.

In Scotland, it would appear that mirror divination may well have survived the centuries of Christian influence. In *The Book of Hallowe'en*, published in 1919, Ruth Edna Kelley describes the custom of young women peering into mirrors reflecting the moonlight on the 31st of October in order to see their future lovers or husbands. Again, the mirror continued as a means of divination peculiar to the female.

So it would seem that in different times and different places the mirror has been fundamentally associated with divination, and particularly sky divination because of its essentially reflective nature. There is also unambiguous evidence of the mirror symbolizing supernatural knowledge. Water also has





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luttrell PSalter C. 1330 - britiSh library, london

A mermaid from the marginalia of an illuminated Psalm book. While the comb and brush also connate pride in outward beauty, certainly one of the Deadly Sins to be avoided, many scholars feel these items are steeped in tradition as magical talismans associated with the early British Roman Catholic Church.

reflective properties, and it is interesting that the Celts cast offerings into lakes and springs, perhaps passing these precious objects through the reflective surface into the 'otherworld'. The mirror may therefore have been almost a kind of portable reflective substitute for water, allowing a druid to peer in to this alternative spiritual world at any time, the mirror acting as a kind of crystal ball.

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The mirrors depicted in the mermaid art of the Middle Ages appear to be typical of early medieval mirrors, and similar examples of these can be seen in museums in Scotland and elsewhere in Europe, although some of the specific mirror designs carved on something known as the Pictish stones have not been found to have an actual equivalent in the historical record.

The Pictish stones seem to be memorial stones commemorating a beloved priest or bishop. Thanks to the Pictish stones, we quite probably have memorial stones acting as a kind of headstone to a tomb, denoting the burial of an important religious individual. If these Pictish Stones are indeed

mark-ers for priests and bishops, the carvings so prominently displayed indicate a great importance in the comb and mirror within that person's life. As religion was the entirety of that person, then, by extension, these tools must have been essential elements of that life. But that religion was a curious con-coction of pagan and Christian elements.

detail of Maiden Stone - inverurie, SCotland

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RONALD L. MURPHY, JR.

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ON MERMAIDS

The mirrors represented on these medieval memorial stones are richly decorated and would have been considered a very desirable accessory. The combs, which can consist of a single or double row of teeth, are much more common, and can be made out of materials such as wood, bone, or rare and more valuable materials such as ivory. Walrus ivory was used extensively so there may be the inherent symbolism in this as well, the material derived from a semi-aquatic mammal. The presence of these combs and mirrors on Pictish stones garnered an observation in an article that was published in the New York Times in September 1888: If the comb came to be closely associated with the early Chris-

tian clergy in Britain, then it is possible that it was already associated with pagan priestly orders, including perhaps the druids. As it seems to be particularly associated with bishops then likewise the comb may have been associated with a druidic elite; the arch druids. The symbols of the 'Mirror and Comb' may therefore in the pre-Christian era be the mark of a high ranking druid, later adopted in the early Christian era as the mark of a bishop or saint, who would also presumably want to emphasize their superiority. As the design of the 'Mirror and Comb' varies from stone to stone, they may even represent depictions of real liturgical combs and mirrors possessed by

particular individuals.

Within the ritual where combing of the bishop's hair was employed, the act itself may indicate some sort of purification. Purifying the bishop's hair by combing it may have been thought to bring the bishop closer to God, and if the author of the extract from 1888 was correct. There is a correlation with the priests and the pagan priests or druids who may have also used the comb for a similar purpose of presumably purifying themselves for communication perhaps not with God but rather with the spirit world. The spirit world was, according to Catholic dogma, a communion of saints not for divination purposes but to obtain graces through intercession. This scenario would also explain the purpose of the comb in the hand of the mermaid; in this case the mermaid is not only able by means of a reflection in her mirror to see into the spirit world, but also by using the comb is facilitating communication between our world and that of the spirits. She was thus seen as the polar opposite of the masculine clergy, a corruption of the male dominated world of Catholic ritual. She was the pagan witch not the ordained priest. If the

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comb was perceived to have a role in helping an individual get closer to the divine or to the spirits, depending on which tradition one ascribes to, then the depiction of the mirror and comb on Pictish stones could well be communicating this function to us.

This medieval idea of the mermaid combing her hair persists even in the modern world. In the era after World War II, sightings of mermaids combing their hair was still reported. In 1947, off the Island of Muck in Scotland, 80-year-old man reported seeing a mermaid sitting on a lobster trap and combing her hair. Of course, Scotland's folklore is filled with the comb and mirror imagery so it is easy to say that preconceived notions were simply transferred to the misidentified sighting of a known sea animal, but such a documented case is nonetheless of interest in our study of the mermaid.

From temptress to soothsayer, we now come to another medieval development that informed us further on the nature and attributes of the mermaid. This is of the melusina, a figure found throughout European folklore, adapted from a feminine spirit of fresh waters in sacred springs and rivers.

But as well shall see, this figure, like the comb and mirror, evolved out of a pagan world into a syncretized Christian motif.

The melusina is usually depicted as a woman who is a serpent or fish from the waist down. She is also sometimes illustrated with wings, two tails, or both. The melusina is a bird-like siren and a sea-going mermaid encapsulated in one creature. Her legends are especially connected with the northern and western areas of France, as well as the Low Countries. She is also connected with Cyprus, where the French Lusignan royal house that ruled the island from 1192 to 1489 claimed to be descended from Melusine, the eponym for the melusina. As the melusina has inherent characteristics of the faerie realm, we shall discuss her lore in a later chapter. But it is important to note the growing importance of this variant of the mermaid in medieval myth. This story can be viewed as a metaphor for female sexuality, and the contradictory duality of the female nature as viewed through masculine medieval eyes.

This same dual-nature symbolism is also at work in alchemy, which employs the siren as a more benevolent emblem of enlightenment. The siren of the philosophers was nearly a muse that inspired their work. Alchemically, the siren's two tails represent sought after unity-- this desired unity of earth and water, body and soul.





ON MERMAIDS

floor MoSiaC C. 1163 - otranto Cathedral, otranto, italy

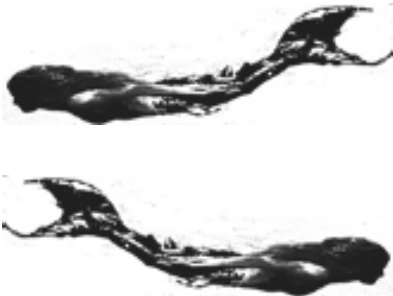
This Tree of Life mosaic pavement in Otranto Cathedral depicts the image of the melusina and other mythical creatures as well as the first representation of King Arthur. The melusina, once a spirit known to inhabit

lakes in pagan beliefs, has now become the Romanticized Lady of the Lake. The melusina having two tails also illustrates the duality of mankind.

Eventually, however, the popularity of the mermaid was too irresistible for even the Catholic Church to exorcise from the culture of its adherents.

She was a personification of the sea, of fecundity. As it had done with other aspects of pagan ideology and symbolism, the Church began to annex this character for itself, conferring its dogmatic beliefs onto this sea-being.

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le roMan de MéluSine by Jean d'arraS, Ca 1450-1500. bibliothèque nationale de franCe

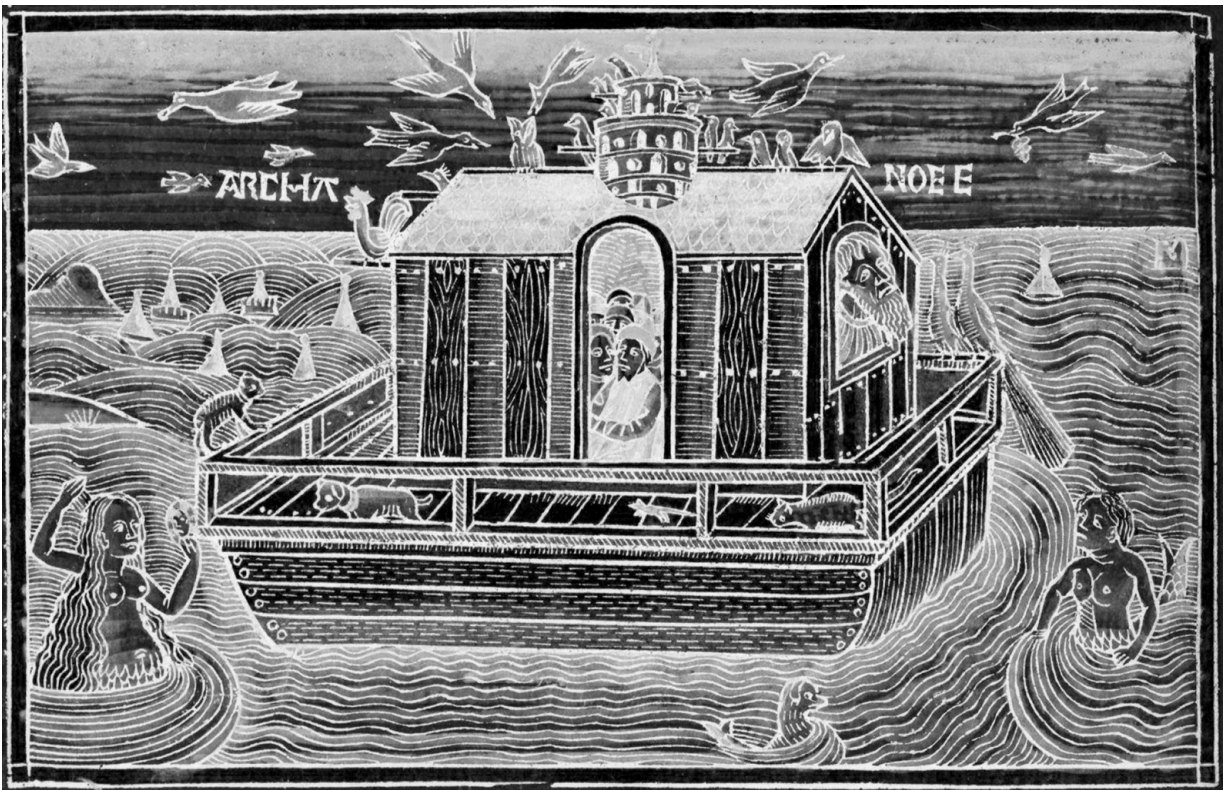
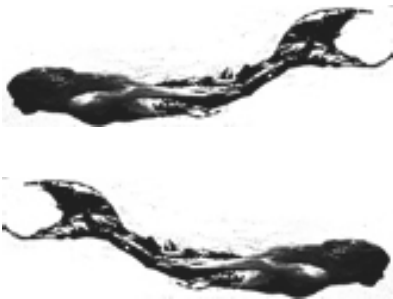
The most common iteration of the siren is as Melusine, a creature from medieval legend. According to this legend, Melusine (sometimes, Melusina) was a beautiful woman with a disturbing tendency to transform into a serpent from the waist down while bathing; it is the discovery of this nature that always resulted in calamity.

Gradually, the mermaid was transmuted from demonic temptress to the allegorical face of Christ in a kind of iconic. Even the mysterious melusina

was viewed by the Church as a symbol of Christ, the two tails demonstrating the dual nature of Christ. Like the culture from which she derived, the mermaid was becoming Christian whether she liked it or not.

Indeed, the mermaid was becoming the personification of grace. She lives in the water, an allegory of dwelling in perpetual Baptism. She is now given the role of one of the chosen few, saved from the Flood, living in a continual state of grace. The harlot of the oceans has now been sanctified and

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ON MERMAIDS

woodCut of noah'S arK - liber ChroniCaruM, 1483

This scene from the Nuremberg Chronicle (aka Nuremberg Bible) shows a mermaid, merman and merdog swimming near Noah's Ark. According to this illustration of the Biblical story of the Flood, when land animals were rescued in the ark, the merfolk stayed nearby to weather the storm. Some commentators in the Middle Ages wrote that Noah's Ark had water compartments to carry mermaids.

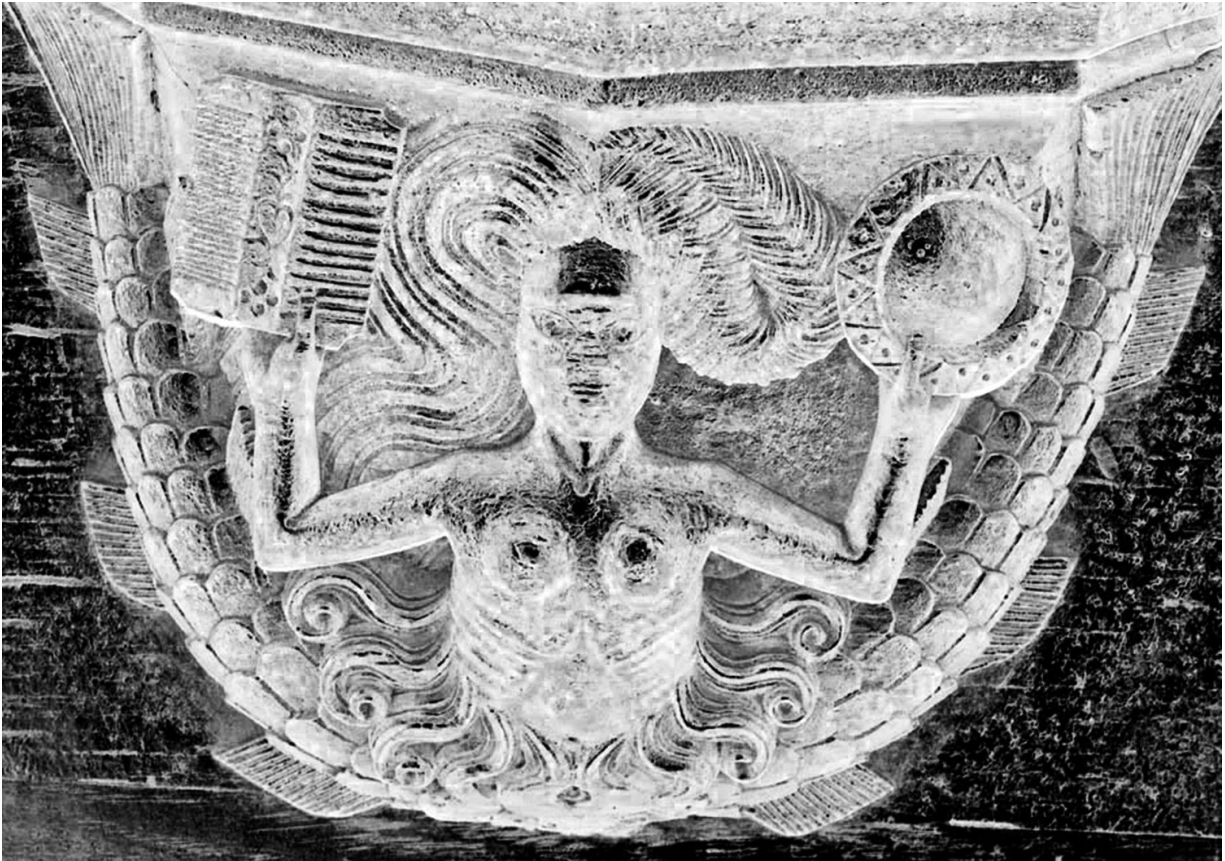
In this illuminated manuscript page, it seems that as the seas retreated, at least two mermaids survived the deluge. But they are not menacing sirens. Nor are they seagoing witches. No, with the Flood, sin was purged from this world. This family was divinely ordained, as were Noah and his family, to carry on their race.

The mermaid was seen now as part of God's Divine Plan. They are now graced beings who live in the sea, personified as the ocean's caretakers.

redeemed by the aesthetic fashioning of the Roman Catholic Church. And this image, of a benevolent water dwelling entity, is the image that has been given to us today. There is no Grecian fear of being torn to pieces by this creature. Now there is a sense of awe and wonder. The mermaid has been romanticized. It is because of this absolution that the mermaid is still a part of our world today.

The mermaid as a siren symbol was once used by the Medieval Church as embodying the lure of fleshy pleasures to be shunned by the God-fearing penitent. The mermaid became a victim of the repressive sexual attitudes





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Carving C. 1440 - CartMel Priory, CartMel, england

Church melusina. She holds the attributes of the mermaid— the comb and mirror.

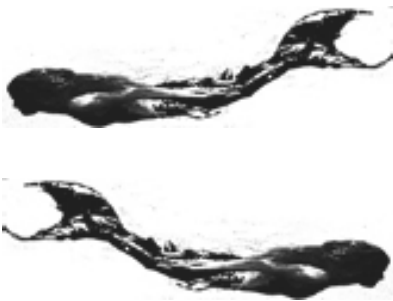
Notice how the figure's hair whirls and flows as if she were underwater.

of the Christian Church. Mermaid carvings figured prominently in church decorations in the Middle Ages to symbolically serve as a vivid reminder of the fatal temptations of the flesh. These rapacious soul-eaters, the enduring the legacy of the bird-sirens of the Greek imagination, were of course not considered to have souls of their own and as a result the legends of the

mermaids anxious to acquire souls arose. The Christian Church, in promoting this idea, was actually stating deeply-held beliefs about all women in order to support male domination. They emphasized the supposed faithlessness and inconstancy of women, the danger of their attraction, and the unlikelihood of their gaining humanity. But female saints were important in the early formation of the Church. Although they could not be priests, women had a place in faith. And so, too, did the mermaid.

St. Senara's Church in Cornwall, England, contains a very famous chair, called the "Mermaid Chair". It is in the side aisle of the church and is thought to be over 600 years old. On its seat are carvings of fish and on one

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ON MERMAIDS

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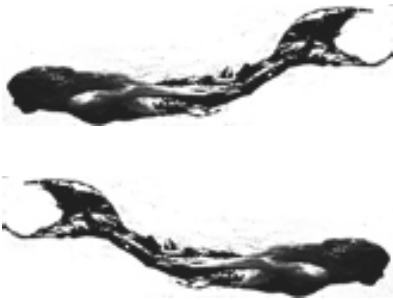
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benCh Carving C. 1534 - ChurCh of the holy ghoSt, CrowCoMbe,

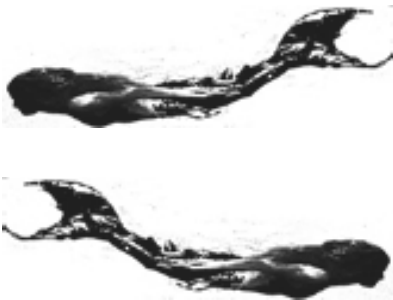
england

This mermaid is a representation of a melusina. Her gaze is intense, nearly demonic. She grips each tail and forcibly spreads them apart. She is the personification of relentless sexual temptation.

side there is a carving of a mermaid. The mermaid is holding up a mirror and a comb. Now the knowledge and power of these important magical objects has been transferred to the gifts given by the Holy Spirit. It is wisdom and power that is alluded to in these symbols, but it is by grace that they are imparted, not through witchcraft.

Moreover, in medieval mystery plays in Cornwall, the mermaid was used

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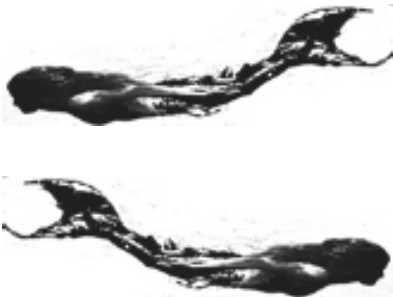
ON MERMAIDS

the Mermaid of zennor - St. Senara's Church, Cornwall, england

to explain the two natures of Christ. Just as she was both human and fish, so Christ could be both human and divine. This merbeing was nearly completely appropriated.

This melding of the mermaid into converted Christian imagery is most concretely witnessed in a little church in a small village located in Upper Sheringham. This place is surrounded by wooded areas with views of the cold gray sea. Outside of the village church a spring of bright water bubbles up from the depths of the earth. It has been quenching thirsts since first humans passed this way. Probably it once had an attendant spirit associated with it. Possibly early initiates were baptized into the new Faith I wondered if the first Christians were baptized in this water. Richard Woodham relates his impression of his encounter with this church and her mermaid with poetic clarity. He writes:

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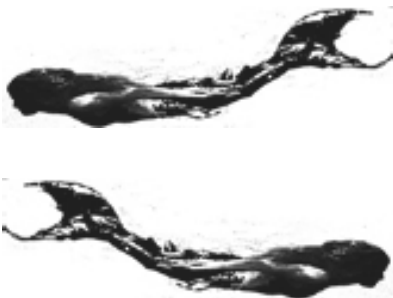
*I imagined the water of baptism washing away the
blood and grime of battle – the water and the blood! How
the world needs that purification still! Taking a little water on the tips of my
right hand I blessed myself remem-
bering my baptism. The words of the book Revelation and
Jesus promise to the woman at the well came to mind.
“To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring
of the water of life.” “...springs of living water welling
up to eternal life!” I guess our thirst for peace and justice*

will never be fully quenched this side of Kingdom Come!

In the mean time I decided to go and have a cup of coffee in church. Inside the door there's a 15th century pew-end - a carving of a mermaid! And attached to the pew framed short story tells how a mermaid sneaked into church to hear the Gospel. It occurred to me that all the baptized are like mermaids! We live in this world, but we're not entirely at home here, we yearn for somewhere better. As Hebrews has it "Here we have no abiding city but we look for one that is to come!"

benCh end - all SaintS ChurCh, uPPer SheringhaM, england

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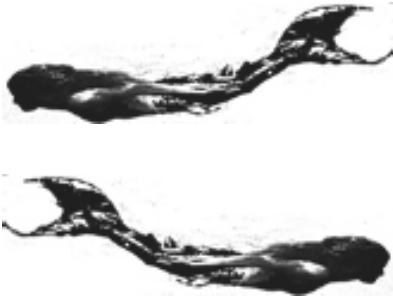


ON MERMAIDS

And this sums up the notion of the medieval mermaid. It was washed up onto the shores of quickly shifting sand, stranded between two opposing worlds. Initially she was cast as a siren stealing Christian souls until she was seen in a new light and became the embodiment of baptism, perpetually living in the waters of grace. She was no longer a demon but a symbol for

Christ. Even the confusing melusina and its alchemical qualities was a Neoplatonist allegory for the dual nature of the Christ. The medieval period was a fascinating time when Western Christian thought coalesced with ancient knowledge leading us into what would become known as the Renaissance.

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The Renaissance Mermaid

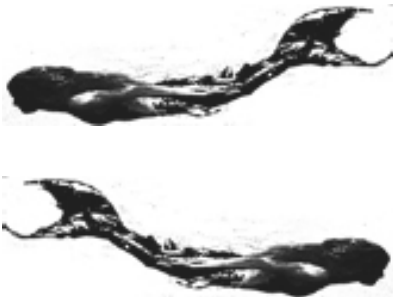
The Renaissance was an intellectual movement that spread across Europe gradually, flourishing in Italy as early as the 14th century and not finding fruition in the British Isles until the 1500s. If the Middle Ages refers to a Catholic culture, the Renaissance was a drive of humanistic ideals. Mankind no longer saw himself as an unclean speck in the grand scheme of things; now man, like the sun, was at the center of the universe.

Art, banking, and literature flourished out of this creative explosion that glorified the human being. Sex was not something to shun and be afraid of — in the Renaissance, sex and desire was to be celebrated. This is illustrated in the reign of King Henry VIII and in the plays of William Shakespeare. Also, the world was being uncovered by explorers seeking lucrative trade routes to link Europe with Asia. This was the time of Columbus and Magellan.

These sailors, of course, brought back incredible tales of merfolk and sea monsters. In this framework, the mermaid was no longer a creature seen as an allegory of Christ in a medieval context. No, the nature of the mermaid as a seagoing vixen was an adequate attribute for the Renaissance.

The mermaid was not seen as merely an ocean-dwelling metaphor, a quaint carryover from superstitious days gone by. Ardent Renaissance mapmakers still included these beasts, and a virtual bestiary of other fantastical creatures, on their meticulous charts and maps which otherwise were startling accurate. Also, as the knowledge of the world began to grow with stories and information brought from Asian spice routes and shipping lanes that plied the waters to the New World, curiosity cabinets became fashionable. These curiosity cabinets were a way for mostly wealthy individuals to display to visitors that they were not only cosmopolitan—a very Renaissance concept—but

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also learned in the ways of the of science by including skulls, skeletons, and hides from various exotic animals. Many a cabinet included a unicorn horn (believed now to be a narwhal tusk) and even a stuffed mermaid which was most probably a Renaissance Jenny Haniver (which is discussed at length in its own chapter).

detail from MaP of aMeriCaS - diego gutiérrez, 1562

Mermaids of the Pacific Ocean, still combing their hair and gazing in mirrors.

But because merchants were able to make a living off of the sea and trade without any actual direct contact, the fear of the ocean was not as intense as

it was in times preceding the Renaissance. However, the fear of the sea was still quite acute in the hearts of sailors. But to most not in the trade that required sea travel, mermaids were a Romanticized creature that became the stuff that dreams were made on.

Mermaid images were prevalent in Renaissance culture, there is no doubt about that. No longer were they tired artifices of the Church; now they were *objects d'art* that graced the wealthy Italian cities. Venice was an important



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trading center with necessary ties to the seas, and the art and architecture of Renaissance Venice, according to art historian Alison Luchs, teem with sea monsters. Chief among these are mermaids and mermen, with the lower bodies of fish, serpents, or dolphins. Other sea hybrids such as horses, bulls, panthers, and even an elephant, swim through Venetian art in fish-tailed fusion. Such creative creature combinations emerge from stone in the shadowy churches and the sunlit courtyard of the Palazzo Ducale, and encircle the bronze flagpole bases in the Piazza San Marco. Their gilded fantastical forms fitted-out banquet tables for illustrious visitors. Luchs goes on to assert, in her informative study of art history from this area and period entitled *The Mermaids of Venice: Fantastic Sea Creatures in Venetian Renaissance Art*, that a “heritage of monsters” from the ancient and medieval worlds co-exist in Venice, illustrating how Venetian artists adapted these creatures to new purposes.”

And the mermaid, as we have seen, is indeed adept at adapting. As the Romans once demonstrated domination over the entire world by displaying exotic animals in the arenas to be slaughtered by brave gladiators, so too

did their ancestors illustrate control over the world by creating a menagerie of fantastical creatures believed to dwell in the ocean depths by painting them on rocks. The mermaid and her ilk were beginning to be somewhat contained if not fully tamed.

At a time when ocean exploration reached its zenith, the mermaid evolved into a necessary companion on many vessels. These beings were sculpted out of wood and garishly painted, becoming the figureheads on the bows of ships. As a paean to the sympathetic magic of traditional cultures, these mermaid figureheads could be viewed as talismans against such aquatic beings.

In 1586, according to the great historian of the sea, Samuel Eliot Morison in his definitive book, *The European Discovery of America*, the great seafaring captain, John Davis had a ship named *Mermayd* which he used in his search for a Northwest Passage.

Back on land in England, where the mermaid was used to confusingly inform the medieval parishioner of the dangerous plague of lust as well as informing them of the dual nature of Christ, the Renaissance invited the mermaid off of the church pews and onto the bar stools. Harkening back to the creature's naughty nature, the Mermaid Tavern was a pub in the rather debauched part of Cheapside in London during the Elizabethan era. Ac-

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cording to William Gifford in his exhaustive 9 volume review entitled *The Works of Ben Jonson*, this tavern was the meeting place of the “Fraternity of

Sireniacal Gentlemen”. Again we see the homage to the mermaid in the name siren. This club was believed to have been formed by none other than the seagoing explorer Sir Walter Raleigh himself. This drinking fraternity met on the first Friday of every month and the members included some of the Elizabethan era’s leading literary figures, among them Ben Jonson, John Donne, John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont, and, of course, William Shakespeare.

The Bard, William Shakespeare, is unquestionably the greatest writer in the English language. He created words and phrases that are part of our everyday vernacular. And Shakespeare further informed us on the nature of the mermaid. In his play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the king of the fairies, Oberon, speaks to one of his metaphysical minions about the mermaid. Shakespeare writes: OBERON:

My gentle Puck, come hither.

Thou rememberest since

Once I sat upon a promontory,

And heard a mermaid on a dolphin’s back

Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath

That the rude sea grew civil at her song,

And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,

To hear the sea-maid’s music?

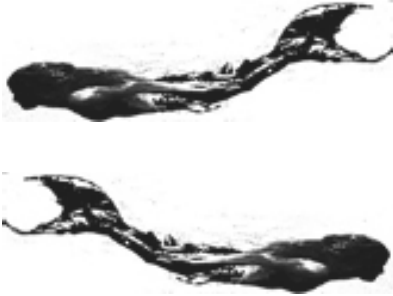
The mermaid has retained its siren song, but the song is much more poetic, choosing harmony instead of death. The tune heals, not destroys. The mermaid is more human than beast, sitting atop a dolphin. And there is a supernatural element to her as well. She is cosmic, like the immensity of the ocean that reflects the stars above.

This healing concept of the mermaid’s song is further demonstrated in the another of Shakespeare’s works, quoted in the play, *Comedy of Errors*,

where the character Antipholus of Syracuse says: O, train me not, sweet mermaid, with thy note,

To drown me in thy sister's flood of tears.

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Sing, siren, for thyself, and I will dote;

Spread o'er the silver waves thy golden hairs,

And as a bed I'll take them and there lie,

And in that glorious supposition think

He gains by death that hath such means to die;

Let Love, being light, be drowned if she sink!

However, in the play *Hamlet*, Gertrude the queen harkens back to the time when mermaids were closely linked with death when referring to Oph-elia's demise says (iv. 7)— Her clothes spread wide;

And, mermaid-like, a while they bore her up.

In two other passages Shakespeare alludes to this legendary creature. Thus in *Henry VI*, the character of Gloucester boasts that he will: drown more sailors than the mermaid.

Ever a man of the Renaissance, Shakespeare cherry-picks the attributes of mermaid lore that serve him best. But no matter how these aquatic creatures are portrayed, they are always quite beautiful to behold, as is evidenced in

Antony and Cleopatra, when the character Enobarbus relates how— “Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,

So many mermaids, tended her i’ the eyes,

And made their bends adornings: at the helm

A seeming mermaid steers.”

In all these cases, Shakespeare has given us a history of the mermaid and, in classic Renaissance style, plowed the past to coalesce a new viewpoint towards the mermaid. But something else is afoot here in the works of Shakespeare as well. The mermaid isn’t purely a woman with a fish’s tale. Indeed, she is so much more. She is capable of shapeshifting to become whatever the poet wants her to be. This is illustrated especially in the “*Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*,” where the “mermaid on a dolphin’s back” could not easily have been so placed, had she had a fish-like tail instead of legs. No, this mermaid described by Shakespeare is quite special. She is a member of the world inhabited by Puck and Oberon. She is a creature of the otherworld,

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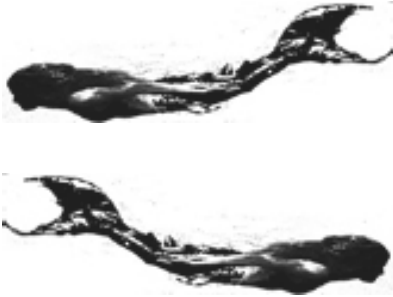


ON MERMAIDS

what the Australian Aborigines would refer to as “the otherkin.” It is appropriate Shakespeare used his play about faeries to usher in this player to our stage. The spotlight will be on this subject in our next chapter as we

focus of the world of the fey and the mermaid's place within the Goblin Universe.

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The Metaphysical Realm:

Mermaid as Fairy Folk

In one of my research books dealing with the paranormal, entitled *Unexplained World of the Chestnut Ridge: A Hike Through Western Pennsylv-*

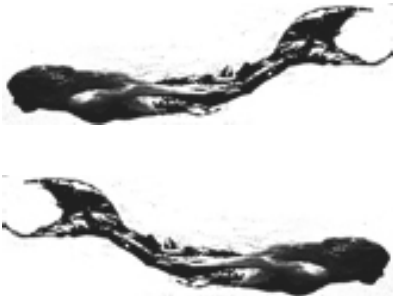
vania's Goblin Universe, I posited that many cryptids reported throughout the world by reputable eyewitnesses may indeed be encounters with beings from the faerie world. After all, many strange creatures have been seen without the subject leaving behind any trace of credible evidence for scientific study. It appears to me, as I have researched the world of cryptozoology for over two decades, that many reports may indeed be defined as experiencing something from a place the esteemed cryptid investigator John Napier referred to as "the Goblin Universe."

This Goblin Universe, it has been proposed, is another dimension that exists simultaneously with ours. The inhabitants of that dimension are generically called "goblins," for lack of a better term. Occasionally, these dimensional worlds overlap, allowing a crossover of sorts. For the sake of argument, if an aquatic humanoid entity exists in another dimension but occasionally

makes an appearance in our world, that goblin would be known as a mermaid in this dimension.

In our in-depth discussion of mermaids and their place in human thought and culture, we must consider the notion that these creatures, if they do indeed exist, may not be wholly natural animals. Indeed, they may not even be physical beings. There may be a metaphysical aspect to them and, in fact, many eyewitness accounts of mermaids seem to suggest that they exist outside of the physical constraints of the corporeal world. They have as their attributes magic, the ability to lure men to their deaths simply by singing, and control over the natural world as is evidenced in them stirring up tem-

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pests and sinking ships. When we examined the mermaid in the medieval imagination, much focus was attended to their attribute of fortune-telling.

This not only places the mermaid on the same level as the witch, it also sets this sea-being apart from the mundane, indicating a preternatural ability of these creatures that suggests that they may swim in the world of the fey, only occasionally slipping into our plane of existence like tenuous bubbles that quickly vanish from sight. This is a very controversial consideration, to be sure, but to examine the mermaid we must investigate all aspects concerning the lore of this creature.

Ultimately, as I have studied the idea that the faerie world may be responsible for many sightings of various paranormal creatures from around

the world, I have concluded that indeed the mermaid may be one of the fey. As I have dived deeply into the waters where mermaids are said to swim, it appears to me that we must at least discuss the possibilities that merfolk may be metaphysical manifestations crossing over from another plane of existence.

It must be pointed out that this supposition is not a novel approach to this subject. When evidence is lacking, many researches have speculated on the intangible quality of the mermaid.

These theoretical goblins from the “other” dimensional universes were once called elementals. These elementals became quite important in occult and alchemical works from around the time of the Renaissance and were particularly paramount in the 16th century works of Paracelsus, a noted physician and alchemist. According to Manly P. Hall, from his 1928 treatise *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*, Paracelsus believed that each of the four classical elements – earth, water, air and fire – was inhabited by different categories of elemental spirits, “liminal creatures that share our world: gnomes, undines, sylphs and salamanders respectively.”

To commentate on the antiquity of these beliefs from which Paracelsus drew, we must further look at one other appellation of the elementals he referred to as the sprite. The word “sprite” is derived from the Latin “spiritus”

(spirit). Variations on the term include “spright” (the origin of the adjective “sprightly”, meaning “spirited” or “lively”) and the Celtic “spriggan”. The term is chiefly used in regard to elves and faeries in European folklore. A water sprite, also called a water faerie, is a general term for an elemental spirit associated with water, according to Paracelsus. Water sprites are said to be able to breathe water or air, and sometimes, can fly. Like the am-





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phibious Oannes or the bird-like sirens, these sprites have an ambiguous and often times confusing nature. In Paracelsus' paradigm, these sprites are mostly harmless unless threatened. The belief in the sprite undoubtedly informed the creation of the mermaid as we know it today, evolving out of this ancient belief of spirits inhabiting the waters and morphing further in the alchemical system of the Renaissance. Paracelsus further describes these elementals, according to Hall, "as the invisible, spiritual counterparts of visible Nature ... many resembling human beings in shape, and inhabiting worlds of their own, unknown to man because his undeveloped senses were incapable of functioning beyond the limitations of the grosser elements." In other words, our senses and perceptions are bound to this world because we are of this world. But unequivocally, this great Renaissance thinker believed in elemental sprites even if they could not be readily seen. As was the world of the Australian Aborigine and the San culture of Africa, the natural world was permeated by spirits of nature. To the elemental water sprite, Paracelsus applied the name "undine."

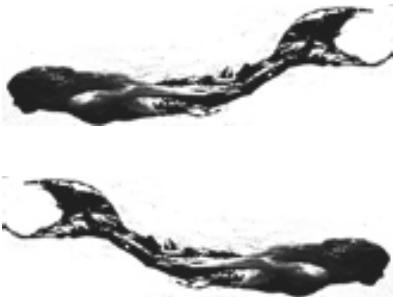
The name undine was derived from the Latin word *unda*, meaning "wave", and first appears in Paracelsus' book *Liber de Nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus*, published posthumously in 1658.

Undines evolved from ancient beliefs which Paracelsus molded into his own alchemical framework, and he placed these humanoid, etheric beings in the realm of the elemental. The elements of earth, water, air, and fire were classed as the fundamental aspects of nature. These elements are the building blocks of reality. This system prevailed in the Classical period, as evidenced in Greco-Roman art, and earth, water, air, and fire had a personification which, once known as a god or goddess, would later become known as an elemental. This elemental world is the frame on which the Goblin Universe was built. This belief was highly influential in medieval natural philosophy. These elementals were also the very spirits of the varied

plant types as well, and, of course, this was developed more schematically and Christianized into the Doctrine of Signatures in the Middle Ages.

The elemental beings called the undines are almost invariably depicted as being female. The group contains many species, of which our subject, the mermaid, is one. According to this model, although these undines resemble humans in form, they lack a human soul, so to achieve immortality they must acquire one by marrying a human. This was a development on the medieval notion of the mermaid as “soul eater,” although this elemental view is

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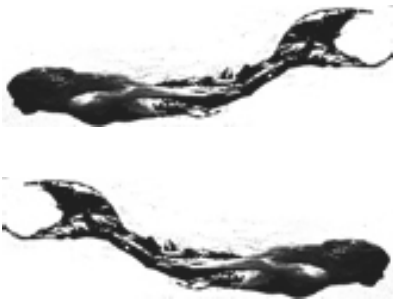


ON MERMAIDS

ParaCelSuS by unKnown fleMiSh artiSt - MuSée du louvre, PariS, franCe Paracelsus (1493 – 1541), born Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, was a Swiss German philosopher, physician, botanist, astrolo-ger, and general occultist. He is credited accordingly as Paracelsus: Herald of Modern Toxicology”.

far less evil in its intent.

Although Paracelsus uses these preexisting foundations, rooted in Greek and Latin thought to name these elemental creatures, he did this to expand on his own philosophical system and add credence to it by commentating on Classic references. His role as an alchemist insisted that he delve into the past to find the answers for the future. Alchemy is a philosophical and protoscientific tradition that was practiced throughout the ancient world that aimed to purify and perfect certain objects. Common aims were chryso-83



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poeia, or, more widely known as the transmutation of “base metals,” such as lead, into “noble” ones, such as gold. Alchemists also sought to create an elixir of immortality. In their role as a precursor to the scientific approach used within medicine, alchemists endeavored to create a “panaceas,” a medicine able to cure any disease.

In his classic 16th-century alchemical work *Liber de Nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus*, Paracelsus identified mythological beings as the personifications of one of the four elements. In his *Philosophia Magna*, first printed in 1566, Paracelsus wrote to “describe the creatures that are outside the cognizance of the light of nature, how they are to be understood, what marvelous works God has created.” In these works, Paracelsus discussed various elemental attributes and delves into these beings’ interaction with our physical world. Like the goddess Atargatis, elemental females could allow their passions to consume them and they were known to fall in love with a human. If this passion eventually led to a marriage, this sanctified coupling would grant them a soul of which humans possessed and of which they could now share. Interestingly,

according to William Godwin in his book, *Lives of the Necromancer*, one of the conditions for joining the secretive society known as the Rosicrucians was to take a vow of chastity in hopes of marrying an elemental.

Rosicrucianism was a philosophical secret society said to have been founded in late medieval Germany that professes its own doctrine or theology “built on esoteric truths of the ancient past”, which, “concealed from the average man, provide insight into nature, the physical universe and the spiritual realm.” What better way to get insight into the spiritual realm than by taking a sprite—or spirit—as your bride?

But the Celtic languages scholar Henry Jenner contends that these Romantic ideas regarding the attraction between humans and elementals was nothing new. Jenner has argued that the elementals grew out of the folklore that preceded them:

The subdivisions and elaborations [of nature spirits] ... by Paracelsus, the Rosicrucians, and the modern theosophists are no doubt amplifications of that popular belief in the existence of a race, neither divine nor human, but very like to human beings, who existed on a ‘plane’ different from that of humans, though occupying the same space which ... resembles the theory of these mystics in its main outlines, and was probably what suggested it to

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them.

Truth could be reached through intermediaries that lead one to esoteric knowledge. This was a tenet in Gnosticism and continued through various

hermetic movements through the Renaissance. The mermaid as a sprite was in its essence and intermediary or conduit between two worlds as well.

This is in direct relation to the shamanistic practices of traditional cultures stretching back into the Neolithic. However, sometimes the attraction wasn't of a purely spiritual nature. In many cases, passion overrides all semblance of reason and tragedy follows. And the folklore is rich in the idea of this wild attraction to this world of ours by the undines.

In the book, *Faeries*, by Brian Froud and Alan Lee, the tale of the mermaid of Lizard Point in Cornwall is related. The Rosicrucians should best reconsider the notion that the elemental was the ideal bride after reviewing this cautionary tale that was first told as an actual event. Elementals do indeed have a knowledge that surpasses human understanding, but sharing in that knowledge exacts a heavy price. This tale is unique in that it encapsulates many notions of the world of the fey yet it still is quite recognizable as a mermaid tale. There are many Christian elements overriding this story, so it is a good one when exploring what is the actual nature of the mermaid.

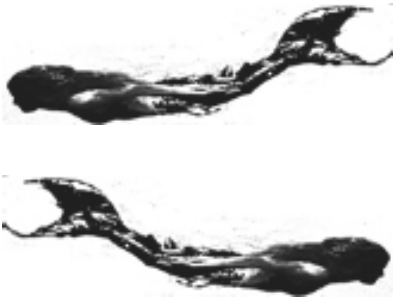
This tale follows that one day a man came upon a beautiful mermaid stranded in a tide pool among the rocks. With her feminine wiles, she persuaded the man to carry her out of her confining plight and escort her to the sea. Snuggling coyly against the man, she offered him three wishes as payment for his generosity. We are now introduced to the magical aspect of the undine at this point.

Being a good Christian man, he chose first to have the power to break the spells cast by witches. This is interesting in the fact that mermaids during the Middle Ages, seen as the workers of magic, were viewed as a kind of witch in their own right. Beguiled, the man is actually submitting to witchcraft to ward off witchcraft.

Secondly, the man wished for the power to "force witch's familiars to do good to others. A familiar was an attendant to the witch. Of course attendants were quite an ancient idea, as fish and birds as well as various

other aquatic and terrestrial fauna were considered as attendants to the goddesses in Greek and Roman mythology.

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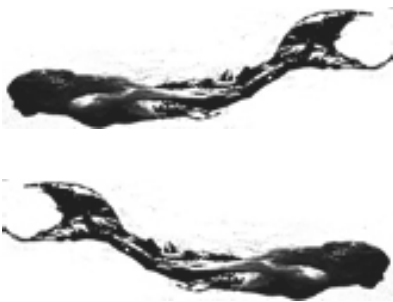
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The third wish was that these two powers would be inherited by his descendants. Lizard Point must have been swarming with witches! Where is the wish for wealth? Or health? This tale illustrates how the supernatural pervaded every aspect of everyday life and when discussing something as seemingly juvenile as faeries we must keep in mind that before the industrial revolution such folk beliefs were so ingrained within agricultural villages that elementals, witches, and faeries were simply the ways of the world and as Christians, society should constantly be at war with these forces. It is odd that the man in the story did not at least suspect that this mermaid that he carried into the surf may possibly have been a faerie-witch.

As the story continues, the mermaid acquiesced and granted her savior these three wishes. But because the man was so unselfish with his wishes, the mermaid added two additional gifts. The wishes are, as quoted by Brian Froud: “first, that none of his family should ever want, and second, a way for him to call her when needed by the use of her magic comb.” Again, the magic comb, man! Can’t you see she is a sorceress! She is even using magic to grant your wishes like a kind of faerie godmother! Apparently there was no college at Lizard Point. Or a school of any kind for that matter. Oh well, let’s continue.

But as the story progresses, the mermaid fell in love with the man, who was as handsome as he was unselfish. Apparently he has not as handsome as his intelligence. So the mermaid bade the man to carry her further into the sea, as Froud says, “holding him tight about the neck when he would have put her down.” She used her voice and her feminine attributes to make the man unaware of his precarious predicament as he waded deeper and deeper into the surf. Here we see the element of the siren song playing out in this story. The kind gentleman would have been lost forever if his faithful dog did not begin to bark frantically, reminding “him of his own dear wife and children.” See, that is why mermaids were displayed in churches— this guy was married yet still falling under her charms! We know from the artwork of the early Middle Ages that mermaids were temptresses that lured men from their faith and families! “But now the mermaid clung even more fiercely and would have dragged him down into the heavy sea,” Froud states, until the man shook himself into reality and out of this enchantress’ influence. He withdrew his knife and threatened the mermaid to release him. The knife was wrought of iron, which is a talisman against faeries and indeed to any inhabitant of the Goblin Realm, and she released her grip and swam away.

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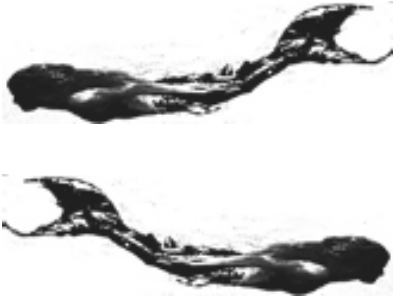
ON MERMAIDS

Well, as time unfolded, all of the man’s wishes were granted and his “family and descendants became famous healers.” This, of course, would be wish-fulfillment for the alchemist, for this elemental could grant the power to heal all ills. So all lived happily ever after, right? That is what we have been taught, after all. Well, not quite. For as the ocean is ever-changeable,

so, too, is the nature of the mermaid's magic. One day the man was out fishing with his son when the beguiling mermaid rose out of the sea. She peered at the man with those seductive aquamarine eyes, the same color as the ocean in which she dwelled, and she shook her silky hair with a come hither toss, bea-coning him into the waves. Without any expression of unhappiness, the man left his son in the boat and jumped into the water with the mermaid, never to be seen again. By falling under her spell he became an active participant in magic and succumbed to the world of the mermaid. Of course, the waves also suggest the inundating fires of Hell that will consume his conspiring soul when he eventually drowns.

This type of consuming lust, personified by water beings and the literal and figurative quenching of this bestial passion is seen elsewhere. In a very Jungian sense, these stories are archetypal motifs. In Greek mythology, the Naiads were a type of water elemental, which was a female sprite, who was the inherent intelligence in fountains, wells, springs, streams, brooks and other bodies of fresh water. Naiads were associated with fresh water, as their counterparts, the Oceanids, were with saltwater and the Nereids specifically with the Mediterranean. However, because the Greeks thought the world's waters were all one immense system, there was some overlap in these mythic elements. Naiads loved humanity intensely, but these undines could be dangerous in their affections. Hylas, a mythical sailor and, according to the Greek poet, Apollonius Rhodius, a member of the *Argo's* crew, was lost when he was taken by naiads who were so enamored by his beauty that they pulled him under into their watery realm.

However, if an undine does not kill that which she loves, a child has been known to be produced from their union. To the Rosicrucian, this would be the ultimate synergy of mind and spirit. The offspring between an undine and a man were human with a soul, but also with some kind of aquatic characteristic, called a watermark. From a sociological perspective this may be an explanation for an otherwise unexplainable physical abnormality genetically inherited by an offspring. Before the advent of modern medicine, many physiological conditions were untreatable and when children were born with



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Who could resist a freshwater pool of willing (and naked) women

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? Well, in this painting by John William Waterhouse, apparently

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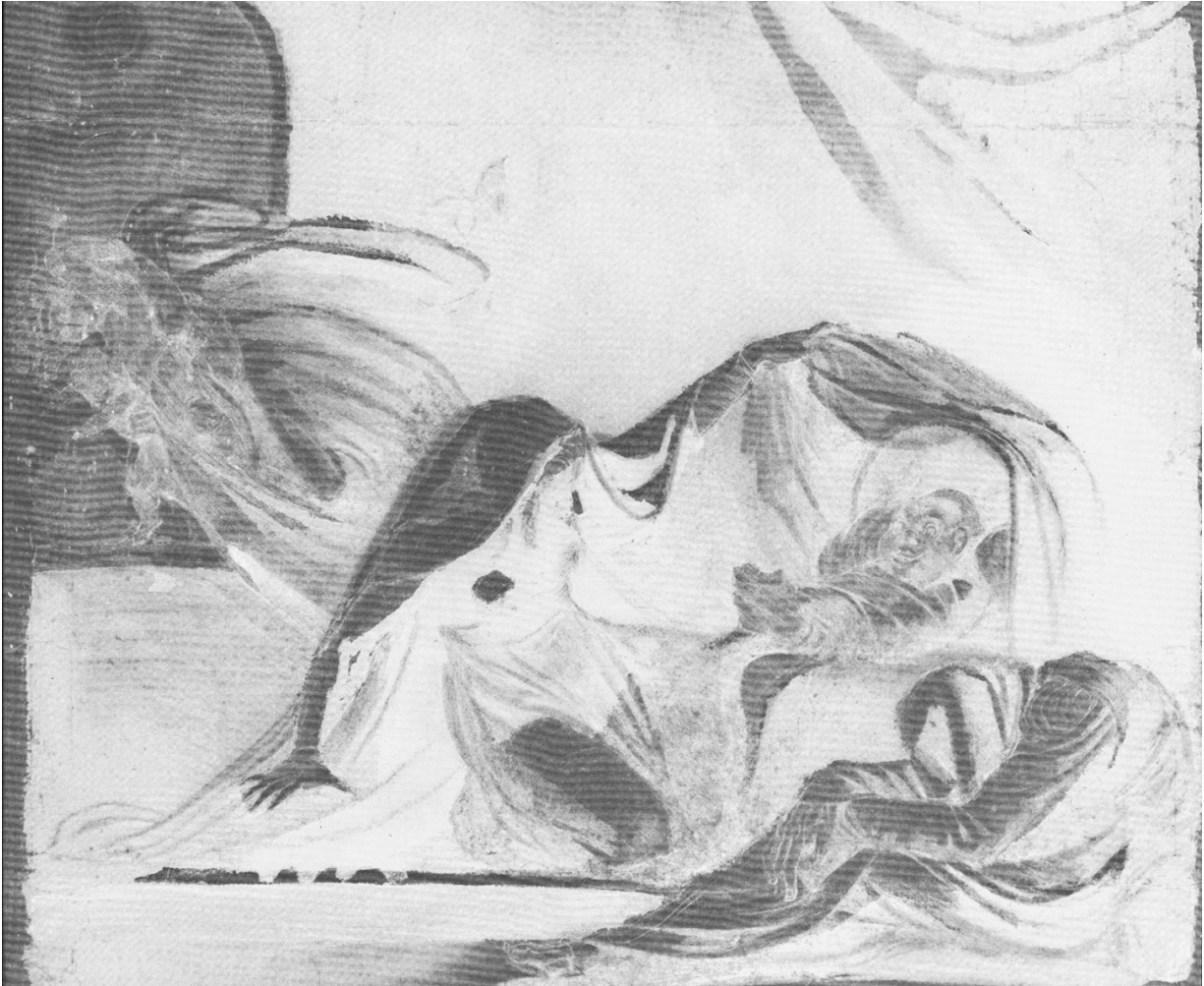
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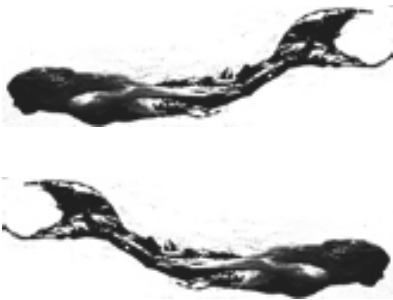
abnormalities it was common to blame the faeries. For instance, in relation to the mermaid mythos, according to the scholars Jane Garry and Hasan El-Shamy, in their article entitled “Animal Brides and Grooms,” published in *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature*, one particular family, known as the MacCodrum clan of the Outer Hebrides, became known as the “MacCodrums of the seals” as they claimed to be descended from a union between a fisherman and a selkie as an explanation for the hereditary horny growth between their fingers that made their hands resemble flippers.

This kind of “outward manifestation of an inward spiritual state” is vividly depicted in the faerie belief in the changeling.

The changeling is a child who was believed to be a faerie child that had been left in place of a human child stolen by the faeries or born from a coupling of human and fey. The theme of the swapped child is common in medieval literature and reflects concern over infants thought to be afflicted der weChSelbalg (the Changeling), 1780 - by Henry Fuseli

Depicts a faerie whisking away a human child and leaving one of their own kind in its place.

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with the aforementioned diseases, disorders, or developmental disabilities without explanation in traditional societies.

But changelings were a terrible burden upon a family in which they had been placed. They were sickly and unable to work, as well as requiring a great deal of food. Scholar D. L. Ashliman points out that changeling tales illustrate the harsh aspect of family survival in pre-industrial Europe. A peasant family's subsistence frequently depended upon the productive labor of each member, even children, and it was difficult to provide for a person who was a permanent drain on the family's scarce resources. "The fact that the changelings' ravenous appetite is so frequently mentioned indicates that the parents of these unfortunate children saw in their continuing existence a threat to the sustenance of the entire family. Changeling tales support other historical evidence in suggesting that infanticide was not infrequently the solution selected." If death did indeed result upon the discovery of a suspected faerie, as Ashliman suggests, then the attending lore concerning

their association with death and their appellation as a stealer of souls is further added to the mystic of the mermaid, thus linking them intrinsically to the faerie realm.

Another hallmark of the faerie realm is the ability to shapeshift. This occurs in the lore of the water elemental as well. Throughout world mythology and in various primitive folklore, shapeshifting, or metamorphosis, is the ability of an entity to physically transform into another being or form. When dealing with shapeshifting in the world of the undine, it usually involves a form of glamour by which a human is seduced to fall in love with the undine.

Or, the shapeshifting can be a device by which the subject leaves the world as a punishment. For instance, Atargatis was transformed to hide from her sins under the waves, away from the critical eyes of humanity, because of her accidental killing of a man.

Mermaids who are identified as faeries seem to have a direct correlation with the land. Shapeshifting is a vehicle by which the merbeing can be a part of both worlds. This is a way for these merbings to straddle two dimensions.

We have explored the mermaid with avian qualities and features, indicating that they have some sort of communion with a physicality beyond their own element. Merrows, Irish merfolk, are said to wear caps with feathers, suggesting a connection with the world above and again establishing a connection between mermaids and birds that has existed since the time of the San rock art. The female merrows, who are very beautiful, appear before storms





ON MERMAIDS

the Kelpie, 1913 - herbert JaMeS draPer

A lake spirit transformed into a woman. The water kelpie is the Scottish name given to a shape-shifting water spirit inhabiting the lochs and pools of Scotland.

It has usually been described as appearing as a horse, but is able to adopt human form. Some accounts state that the kelpie retains its hooves when appearing as a human, leading to its association with the Christian idea of Satan. Almost every sizeable body of water in Scotland has an associated kelpie story, but the most extensively reported is that of Loch Ness.

as an omen. They are gentle by nature and frequently fall in love with fishermen. But their love is not so much an overwhelming attraction but

rather it is an alternative to their other choice. “This,” as Brian Froud and Alan Lee writes in the book *Faeries*, “can partly be explained by the extreme ugliness of the male Merrows. Despite their alarming aspect, the males too have their redeeming features as they are generally amiable and jovial in character.”

Merrows may well have an explanation in science because they appear to be descriptions of the manatee, the gentle aquatic mammal possibly mistaken for a bearded man as it bobbed at the ocean’s surface. These theories will be explored in a later chapter. But as far as a connection with the land and the aspects of the aquatic faerie, shapeshifting was identified as a way to interact between the worlds of the fey and humanity. Nowhere is this shapeshifting attribute more poignant than in the tales of the selkie.

Stories concerning the shapeshifting selkie are generally regarded as ro-

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mantic tragedies. Sometimes the human will not know that their lover is a selkie, and wakes to find their heart’s desire has returned to their seal form.

However, a selkie can only stay with one human for a short amount of time before the selkie must return to the sea. Then that selkie is unable to make contact with that human again for a symbolic seven years (a duration of time seen in the Judeo-Christian belief system as well as evident throughout a myriad of world cultures) unless the human steals their selkie skin and hides it or burns it.

According to Alison Hardie, in a 2007 article entitled, “Dramatic decline in island common seal populations baffles experts – Mystical Connections,”

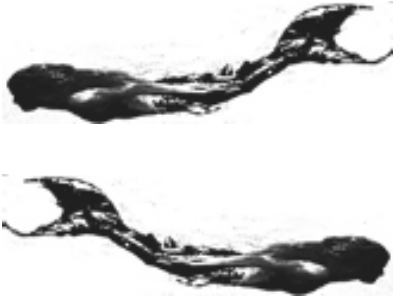
published in *The Scotsman*, this belief still lingers in the 21st century.

Sometimes the selkie lure their loves into the sea, reminiscent of the siren’s song, so that they can be with them there. Some stories from Shetland have the selkie luring islanders into the sea at midsummer, the lovelorn humans never returning to dry land. And of course, as William Shakespeare displays brilliantly in his play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the summer solstice, traditionally known as midsummer because it is in the middle of the growing season, is the time for faeries to play. At Midsummer, as well as on October 31, the veil that separated our world from the Goblin Universe is believed to be at its thinnest, facilitating the two worlds to interact more readily. Unfortunately, a selkie can straddle two worlds but we humans cannot. But the lure of the selkie is simply too strong to resist. Like the tide, this attraction draws you in, pulling you against your will.

Part of this allure is an otherworldly physical beauty of the selkie, typical of mermaid mythology. The male selkie is described as being very handsome in their human form, and having great seductive powers over human women. They typically seek those who are dissatisfied with their life, such as married women waiting for their long absent fishermen husbands. If a woman wishes to make contact with a selkie male, she must shed seven tears into the sea. Again we see the symbolic and magical number of seven attached to the selkie, a detail quite appropriate when dealing with the supernatural.

Female selkies are just as appealing, their beauty utterly captivating. If a man steals a female selkie’s skin she is in his power and is forced to become his wife. Female selkies are said to make excellent wives, but because their true home is the sea, they will often be seen gazing longingly at the ocean.

This, of course, also figures into a male dominated society where women are



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subjugated domestic servants. In a kind of wish fulfillment, if the selkie finds her skin she will immediately return to her true home, and sometimes to her selkie husband, who awaits her return to the sea.

Sometimes, a selkie maiden is taken as a wife by a human man and she has several children by him. In these stories, it is one of her children who discovers her sealskin, often unaware of its significance, and she soon returns to the sea. The selkie woman usually avoids seeing her human husband again but is sometimes reported as visiting her changeling children and playing with them in the waves, a metaphoric and literal boundary between the two very different worlds in which they inhabit.

In the remote and rugged Faroe Islands there is another version of the story of the selkie, also known as a seal wife. A young farmer goes to the beach to watch the selkies dance. The faerie dance is an element in many stories involving a voyeuristic human who stumbles upon a clandestine faerie event.

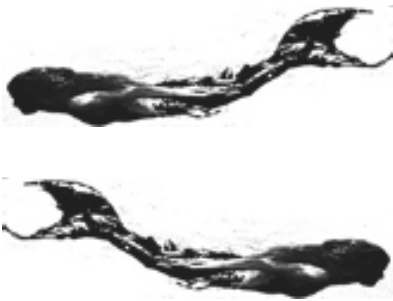
In this tale, the man hides the skin of a particularly beautiful selkie maid he feels a burning desire towards so she cannot go back to sea, and he forces her to marry him. Again we see the latent theme of masculine domination over the feminine. Even the land represents the male and the ocean has always represented the female element. So here the masculine has captured the essence of the feminine.

As the story goes, the man does indeed gain control over the selkie. The farmer stores the selkie skin in a locked chest and keeps the key with him both day and night. She is a veritable prisoner, a captive stolen from the sea.

But one day when out fishing, he discovers that he has forgotten to bring his key. When he returns home, his enslaved selkie wife has escaped back to the freedom embodied in the sea, necessarily leaving their changeling children behind.

Later, when the farmer is out on a hunt, he kills both his selkie lover's selkie husband and their two selkie sons, and she promises to take revenge upon all the men of the island. In true mermaid fashion, the selkie prophecies some men shall be drowned, while some shall fall from cliffs and slopes, while other will die in many other diverse ways, continuing until so many men have been lost that the corpses will be able to link arms around the whole island. To this day, some more superstitious folk believe that deaths still occur on this island out of this selkie's curse.

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A legend similar to that of the selkie is also told in Wales, but in a slightly different form. In several of these traditions, the selkies are humans who have returned to the sea. In some versions of this story, a changeling baby escapes to the sea immediately after birth, connoting the notion of a changeling demonstrating its true nature.

It must be noted that the idea of seal shapeshifters similar to the selkie exist not only in the folklore of the British Isles and their environs, but this motif is reiterated in the folklore of many cultures. A corresponding creature existed in Swedish legend, and the Chinook people of North America have a similar tale of a boy who changes into a seal.

As the anthropologist A. Asbjorn Jon has recognized though, there is a strong body of lore that indicates that selkies “are said to be supernatural-ly formed from the souls of drowned people.” This drowning could be a convoluted folk memory of believed drowning victims able to survive and make it to the safety of shore. Another belief is that shipwrecked Spaniards were washed ashore and their jet black hair resembled seals, this according to Carole B. Silver, in her article *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness*. Marrying one of these women believed drowned could indeed inform the idea of a mermaid needing to marry to gain a soul.

Marrying a supposed drowning victim would indeed be akin to marry someone who did not have a soul, as at her death the soul would have crossed over. In legend, one method for a mermaid to gain a soul was to marry a human being; the best known form of this legend being Hans Christian Anderson’s *Little Mermaid*. Celtic mythology included the Liban, a young woman drowned and transformed into a mermaid, who after 500 years enlisted the aid of the Irish St. Comgall to save her soul, a story undoubtedly dealing with the syncretisation of Christianity into a pagan worldview. This melding of religious themes is also present in the story of the mermaid of Iona who wept many bitter tears over her inability to leave her ocean home to gain her promised soul. And St. Patrick allegedly had a custom of transforming pagan women into mermaids, adding to their marine population.

However, as I researched meticulously the notion of shapeshifting, both in writing this book and in investigating the attributes of the inhabitants of the goblin universe for other treatises, I am struck with a rather odd allusion to and comparison with Roman Catholic practice and belief. As we have seen in the chapter focusing on the medieval mermaid and in the precepts of





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alchemy, the idea of mutability is evident. The alchemists looked for a sorcerer's stone by which to carry out their work of transformation. Mermaids were known to be magical oracles with the ability to shapeshift. The mermaid's attributes were also the mirror and comb. But as evidenced by the remarkable Pictish memorial stones commemorating religious authorities and the early Catholic ritualistic use of the sacramental mirror and comb, it seems to me that transubstantiation, the miraculous changing of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, is the basis for many of these tales of shapeshifting. In certain contexts, the shapeshifting is a direct affront to and a corruption of Transubstantiation, as when beauty is used to belie terrible ugliness that would denote danger. But even within the alchemical world, spirits are at work. As we have seen, this act of becoming something else can be quite dangerous to the subject of a story which acts as a sort of morality play. Think of our friend over at Lizard Point. Certainly the listener to this story felt the same indignation I did when given all the clues concerning the mermaid's true nature. But the idea, indeed the very essence, of changing from one state of being to another is directly centered in these mermaid tales. The female water elemental was known all through Europe in places with no direct connection with Classical cultures, surviving in the myths of the spirits of Celtic wells later were rededicated to saints, and in the medieval figure of the melusina.

And the figure of the melusina is the lynch pin that connects our historical study of the mermaid with the faerie realm. As she reconciled the pagan to the Christian ideals inherent in the Middle Ages, so too does this figure of the melusina connect the dots between the Goblin Universe and the mermaid.

Robert Graves offered a sociopolitical reading of the common myth-type in which a mythic king is credited with marrying a naiad and founding a city: the reader will find the fairy of Normandy, or Bretagne, adorned

with all the splendor of Eastern description. The fairy Melusina, also, who married Guy de Lusignan, Count of Poitou, under condition that he should never attempt to intrude upon

her privacy, was of this latter class. She bore the count many children, and erected for him a magnificent castle by her magical art. Their harmony was uninterrupted until the prying husband broke the conditions of their union, by concealing

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himself to behold his wife make use of her enchanted bath.

Hardly had Melusina discovered the indiscreet intruder, than, transforming herself into a dragon, she departed with a loud yell of lamentation, and was never again visible to mortal eyes; although, even in the days of Brantome, she was supposed to be the protectress of her descendants, and was heard wailing as she sailed upon the blast round the turrets of the castle of Lusignan the night before it was demolished.

When in 963 A.D. Count Siegfried of the Ardennes bought the feudal

rights to the territory on which he founded his capital city of Luxembourg, his name became connected with the local version of the melusina. This mermaid, now personified in the person of Melusina, magically made the Castle of Luxembourg on the Bock rock, historically the center point of Luxembourg City, appear the morning after her wedding. She was a character imbued with magic. On her terms of marriage, she too required one day of absolute privacy each week. Alas, her husband could not resist temptation, and on one of the forbidden days he spied on her in her bath and discovered her true nature to be that of a mermaid. When he let out a surprised cry, Melusina caught sight of him, and she and her bath immediately sank into the solid rock. Melusina surfaces briefly every seven years as a beautiful woman or as a serpent, denoting her ability as a shapeshifter. She holds a small golden key in her mouth. Whoever takes the key from her will set her free and may claim her as his bride. We see the symbolic seven years evident in this tale as in that of the selkie mythos. And as a kind of variation of the selkie legend but with a much more ardent feminist overtone, the melusina holds the key and she is in charge of the action.

In another variation of the foundation origin mythos proposed by Robert Graves, we find the chronicler Giraud le Cambrien reporting that Richard I of England was fond of telling a tale according to which he was a descendant of a countess of Anjou who was in fact the fairy Melusine, concluding that his whole family “came from the devil and would return to the devil.”

Martin Luther, who was responsible for the Reformation when he nailed his 95 Thesis to the cathedral door at Wittenberg on Halloween in 1517, knew and believed in the story of another version of Melusine, known as the die Melusina zu Lucelberg, whom he referred to several times as a succubus, a demonic figure who draws life from the living, a kind of soul eater



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to be avoided at all costs. This succubus attribute, of course, has a precursor in the belief that mermaids had to steal the soul from a person in order to gain one.

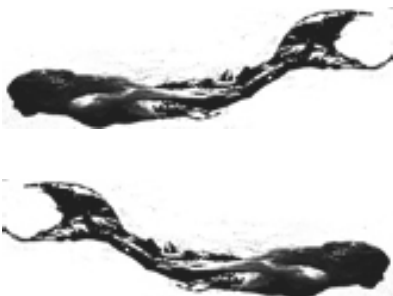
Melusina woodCut engraving - unKnown

A melusina in all her crowned glory.

The melusina is a convenient encapsulation of many of the mermaid

myths and attributes. Melusina is one of the pre-Christian water-faeries who were sometimes responsible for changelings. The “Lady of the Lake”, who spirited away the infant Lancelot and raised the child, was such a water elemental conflagrated into the melusina mythos. The melusina is a shapeshifting elemental, responsible for sucking the soul from the living. However, her importance was such that many men traced their origin back to this mermaid-faerie. She was feared yet desired. She was an elemental capable of marrying and producing offspring. The melusina was the embodiment of the mermaid as fey.

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Mermaid as the

Subjugated Female

Darwin may have been quite correct in his theory that man descended from the apes of the forest, but surely woman rose from the frothy sea, as resplendent as Aphrodite on her scalloped chariot.

A Survival Guide for Landlocked Mermaids, Margot Datz, 2008

This poetic contemporary commentary is appropriate for this stage of our journey. We have travelled vast oceans of time and space, hoping to catch a glimpse of that mythological siren known as a mermaid. However, what would you say if I told you we have seen mermaids all this time? What would you say if mermaids are images of the subjugation of the sacred feminine, that the true power of the female was so feared by the masculine hierarchy through the ages that this power was personified as a demon or some sort of chimera in hopes of controlling it? This may be the most controversial chapter in a book that already included a section on the Goblin Universe, but indeed research is proving that in many cases the truth behind the mermaid may be women doing apparently supernatural feats beyond the ability of men.

I unapologetically subscribe to Carl Jung's belief in the theory of archetypal images which are universal and which spring from the collective unconscious, playing out in myths, fairytales and folklore. These concepts portray mermaids as an archetypal figure of the "Sacred Feminine," that creative, sacrosanct female power, submerged, and, as the writer Gary R. Varner elo-quently states: "gatekeeper to the mysterious deep - the unconscious realm."

In European traditional fairytales and cultural myths, beautiful mermaids,





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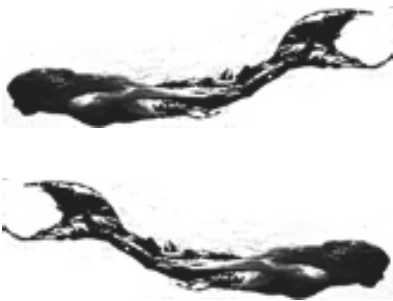
often depicted combing their hair and holding mirrors, would lure sailors to jump into the waves and join them in their underwater world. Is this a symbolic invitation to men to be courageous and dive deep down into the realm of the unconscious, to get in touch with the anima, and all the treasures of the sacred feminine - qualities which have over time sadly been denigrated and lost - and to transform into a new wholeness?

Carl Jung suggested that the age of patriarchy has reached its end, and that the time has finally arrived for feminine power to rise up and join with the masculine to create a new world order – one of partnership with each other, with all animals and with the earth. This partnership, however, upsets the status quo. So the power of the woman is mythically retained in mermaid lore. However, when reading these tales and looking between the lines, we begin to unravel some fascinating details concerning the mermaid. She then becomes far less fish-like and nearly wholly human. What do these stories demonstrate? I feel they reveal the subjugation of the woman by a male dominated society. Let's investigate this theory further.

In the Arabic literature represented by the *One Thousand and One Nights* collection, there includes several tales featuring “sea people”, such as “Djullanar the Sea-girl.” Unlike depictions of mermaids in other mythologies, these merfolk are anatomically identical to land-bound humans, differing only in their ability to breathe and live underwater. They can, and, interbreed with land humans, and the children of such unions have the ability to live underwater. In the tale “Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman”, the protagonist Abdullah the Fisherman gains the ability to breathe underwater and discovers an underwater society that is portrayed as an inverted reflection of society on land. C.S. Lewis mirrored this concept in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, writing about an aquatic realm ruled by a royal hierarchy but living, notwithstanding, in a perpetual state of grace.

In the Arabic tale and in the story by Lewis, this underwater society of merbeings follows a form of primitive communism where concepts like money and clothing do not exist. In “The Adventures of Bulukiya”, the protagonist Bulukiya’s quest for the herb of immortality leads him to explore the seas, where he encounters societies of mermaids. It is a literal reflection of our world in the mirror of the ocean. However, here, under the waves, an equal-ity exists and women are on par with the men. The shapeshifting aspect only occurs when there is an attempt of assimilation, when the mermaid leaves her element and ventures into ours.

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However, and quite interestingly, there are anthropological approaches to this notion of shapeshifting involving a wholly natural yet nonetheless intriguing explanation for this metamorphosis. Maybe the faerie realm is not responsible for providing the undines for many of these traditional tales.

According to Scottish folklorist and antiquarian, David MacRitchie, it is believed that early settlers in Scotland likely encountered, and even married, Finnish and other women indigenous to Artic countries, who were misidentified as selkies because of their sealskin kayaks and animal clothing. After all, if you took a woman’s fur clothing, her skins as it were, she would be hard pressed to endure the rigors of an icy ocean without the imperative protection required for such an arduous voyage. However, if she did get these “skins” back, she assuredly would return to her former life with her husband and children. She would simply be seen disappearing into the sea. Others have suggested that the traditions concerning the selkies

may have been due to misinterpreted sightings of Finn-men, or Inuit peoples descending from the Davis Strait. The Inuit wore clothes and used kayak, both which were made of animal skins. Sigurd Towrie, in the article “The Origin of the Selfie-folk: Documented Finmen Sightings,” published online at Orkneyjar.

com, states that these clothes and the kayaks would lose buoyancy when saturated and would need to be dried out. It is thought that sightings of Inuit divesting themselves of their clothing or lying next to the skins on the rocks could have led to the belief in their ability to change from a seal to a man. Or in our case, seal to woman. And to think that a woman would be capable of traversing alone the frigid waters of the icy North Atlantic would also have an aura of wonder and “unbelievability” to it. Scottish folklorist and antiquarian, David MacRitchie believed that early settlers in Scotland probably encountered, and even married, Finnish and Saami women who were misidentified as selkies because of their sealskin kayaks and clothing.

But this marriage may indeed be a forced union in a male dominated world where women had few options. A woman working outside of this society, not controlled by the paradigms in place, would have been seen as “the other,” a being outside of this world. It would be affront to the masculine worldview if she was simply a woman, would it not? These Artic women seem to live in their own world, coming out of the horizon like the faeries of lore. This world is a male dominated world. These women are not influenced by the gravity of masculinity. Therefore, they must be broken and tamed.

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you were to come upon someone drying this outer garment. With little cultures, other Clothing Northern countries. It would form if of ocean's horizon. Photo: Becky Qilavvaq Perhaps we do indeed need to look at the mermaid story from a different perspective. In most stories of mermaids, a female is sighted, though there are a few reports of mermen. When mermen are seen, they are ugly and bestial and quite probably misidentified ocean-going mammals like the manatee. As we have seen, when mermaids interact with mankind, there is a direct correlation with the land. In many mermaid stories we are told they come out of the sea and marry fishermen, which is a very clever trick for someone with a fish's tail. Except that in some reports a fish tail is not always 101



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mentioned. The ancient Greeks called mermaids 'sea nymphs' or 'nereids'

and describe them as simply nude women who swam in the sea, similar to a reported sighting in Scotland in the 19th century of a nude woman sitting on a rock as the waves crashed around her. Maybe mermaids were not a confusion of human and animal elements. Maybe mermaids were created

because their roles were simply upsetting male domination. Indeed, maybe women throughout history and cultures were doing something men were not capable of doing.

Here is a rather interesting account reportedly occurring on September 8

1809 by a sober school master in England. He wrote to *The Times* newspaper stating that twelve years previous to his reporting the incident he was on the shore of Sandside Bay when he saw a naked woman sitting on a rock.

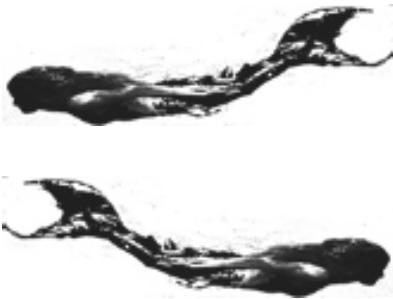
He then only concluded she was a mermaid because he realized that the rock she was sitting on was too dangerous for swimmers. This was the issue in the Scottish report as well. Then this perceived mermaid dropped into the roiling sea and swam away quite naturally. According to the astonished schoolmaster, other people also witnessed the same incident, adding a further tinge of credibility to his tale.

In investigating this tale closely, let's examine the facts closely. The school master clearly states at first, that what he saw was a naked woman, he made no mention of a fish's tail. It seems he only changed his mind when he realized that where she sat was dangerous for swimmers. His mind, having an awareness of what a mermaid was, filled in the blanks so that what he was witnessing made sense. Eyewitnesses are informed by preconceived notions in order to make sense of what they are seeing. This is how reality works.

Reality is subjective to each and every observer. To the school master, seeing a woman in a dangerous area in the ocean caused his mind to conclude that she must be a mermaid. The alternative was far too asinine to consider.

Women simply don't do such things. After all, he may have asked himself, what was a naked woman doing swimming in the sea in 19th century Britain? Such behavior may not be so unusual in the 21st century, but women in those times didn't go in for athletic sports like swimming in dangerous waters, or parade themselves completely nude in public. At least not according to the stringent mores of the period. So if an occasional woman rebelled against such institutional notions, what was a proper gentleman to conclude if the truth did not correlate with the paradigms of proper Victorian English society? Yes, it could be no other thing than a mermaid. Women simply did

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not do such things.

Reports of mermaids having legs is not that unusual. In Ireland, old tales claim that the mermaids lived on dry land below the sea. In the Shetland Islands, the folklore states that mermaids wear animal skins to swim in the water and then take them off to walk on land. Could this be an early description of an early form of wet-suit? These islanders also report that they themselves are descendants of mermaids. The Orkney Islanders claim that mermaids don't have fish's tails, but instead wear long petticoats that resemble a fish's tail when they swim in the sea. There are also many reports of mermaids having two tails, like the melusina we have studied. Could they be two legs instead, ending in an early type of flipper? After all, it must be remembered that in 1500, Leonardo da Vinci invented flippers for divers, so this is not a new idea in history. And considering the need for such a device by people actually dependent on the sea, well, swim flippers may have been invented much earlier than that. Maybe even by a woman!

the Selkie, 2012 - JeSSiCa Shirley

This artist keenly depicts the humanity behind the selkie myth.

The key to making sense of all these tales comes through in the story of a Dutch seaman called Hamel. He was on a Dutch ship, called *The Sperwer*, that was wrecked near the Korean island of Cheju in 1653. Hamel and other surviving crew members of the wreck spent ten months on the island. On returning to Holland, he wrote a book about his experiences and claimed that there were mermaids on the island. What's interesting is that even today women from the island dive for shellfish and edible seaweed. Does this

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mean that what we refer to as mermaids are simply women divers, witnessed from a very misogynistic perspective?

There have been historic reports of women divers working off the coasts of the islands of Japan going back 1500 years. They dive for shellfish, seaweed, starfish, octopuses and pearls all year round, even in the winter when the water temperature is down to 50°F. They have been known to dive as deep as 100 feet and stay underwater for over 3 minutes. They gather the food, placing it in a net around their waists. Many of these female divers keep on diving productively to up to 60 years of age or more. In the past they only dived in a loincloth but in more recent times they use modern flippers, face masks and snorkels. Scuba gear was banned by the authorities as they feared that the use of modern equipment would over fish the area.

In Korea they allow wet suits but they are banned in Japan. There are a few male divers as well but women are able to work far longer in cold water than the average man due to the physiology of the female body. Physiologically, women have more subcutaneous fat and a higher shivering threshold than men, making them more equipped to withstand cold waters.

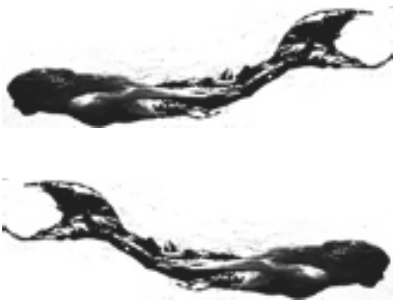
In the 1960s, western journalists discovered these divers and topless photos of some of the more attractive women appeared in magazines and books, making them aboriginal pin-up girls of sorts. Yet it seems these women were not just half-naked beauties. Indeed, these divers are tough working women. A clue to how tough these female divers are comes from the fact that both the Chinese and Japanese call mermaids “dragon-wives.” Indeed, these women seem to be the very embodiment of the “otherkin.” And it may be that shapeshifting is part of the mystique of these women, much in the same way berserkers shapeshifted before battle.

These women may have been very empathic and attuned to nature, this

according to Nick Mamatas. Some of these divers claim to be able to shapeshift mentally or astrally—meaning that they experience the sense of being in a particular aquatic form while not actually changing physically. This neatly explains the ability for these women to bear cold temperatures and endure long periods holding their breath. It may come down to mind over matter.

These female divers are indeed abnormal in world cultures, working in a niche that males are unable to do. In this fact, there is a kind of cultural jealousy apparent against these women. The Cheju-do women are referred to by some Korean commentators as amazons because they are far more as-

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sertive than ordinary Korean women. They don't know their place, in other words. It seems that while the women are out diving, the men stay at home and look after the children and house. This is a cultural embarrassment.

For this reason, it is believed, that at one time no documents exist about the women divers in Korea, because historically records concerning them were forbidden, this according to William Bond in *The Secret History of Mermaids*.

This cultural perception of these female divers as “different” and part of their own class exists elsewhere. Haenyeo, literally “sea women,” refers to female divers in the Korean province of Jeju. Known for their independent spirit and determination, the haenyeo's diving tradition dates back to 434

BC. The first mention of female divers in historical literature does not come until the 17th century where they are described as “Jam-Nyeo,” literally “diving women.”

By the 18th century, female divers, at this point commonly referred to as haenyeo, outnumbered male divers. Between the 17th and 18th century, a significant number of men died at sea, either in war or in deep-sea fishing accidents, the women filling the void and working the ocean depths.

Whatever the reason, as sea diving became a female-dominated industry, many of the haenyeo were subsequently their family’s soul provider. In the early 1960s, according to SK Hong, haenyeo harvests accounted for 60% of Jeju’s fisheries revenue and 40% of haenyeo husbands remained unemployed. It suggests that because of the embarrassment of women doing a tough job better than they could, patriarchal institutions have kept silence about women divers. If this was true in Korea, could it also have been true in Europe and the Americas?

According William Bond in his fascinating and authoritative *The Secret History of Mermaids*, the late Jacques Cousteau once witnessed women who dived completely naked for clams and crabs in Tierra del Fuego. These islands rise up out of the ocean at the most southern point of South America in waters that can dip to as low as 40°F. And women have been seen doing the same in outlying Scottish islands as well. So how is it that women divers were able to plunge deep down in very cold waters near the Arctic and Antarctic circles? These are extremely dangerous conditions that would kill a normal man within twenty minutes. But these divers are not men... they are women. Subdermal layers of insulating fat keep them better insulated

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in much the same way marine animals like dolphins and seals have a layer of blubber to keep them warm. Men lack this layer, making them far more susceptible to succumb to the cold quicker than a woman. The fact that women can survive in these waters was proven by Lynne Cox. In 1987, this American woman swam across the Bering Strait, from the U.S. to the then Soviet Union, traversing waters barely above the freezing mark. Cox accomplished this remarkable feat without a wetsuit, aided only with a normal swim suit, cap and goggles.

This swim completed by Cox strikes us as nearly supernatural. Women, we have been taught, simply do not have the body muscle mass to compete with men. In the sporting world, we are used to men outperforming women.

However, there is one sport where women now outperform men. That sport is the marathon open water swimming. The first woman to swim 21 miles across the English Channel was Gertrude Caroline Ederle of the United States. In 1926, she broke the record held by the fastest man by one hour and fifty-nine minutes. She possibly would have made the swim with a better time had it not been for heavy seas in the second half of her swim.

Another sport where women can out-perform men is free-diving. Free-

diving is descending to great depths without the use of oxygen tanks.

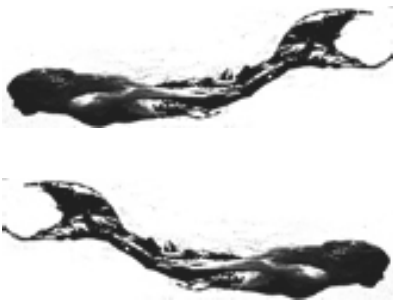
William Bond states that this sport has “surprised scientists who have found that in deep dives the bodies of trained free-divers react exactly like that of a marine mammal.” The human heart beat drops until it is barely beating, the crushing water pressure presses in on the lungs until they are the size of a Pepsi can, and what little oxygen is left in the body is used to keep the heart and brain going. “This is exactly what happens to the bodies of whales and dolphins when they deep dive,” says Bond.

On August 17, 2002, a new Freediving World Record was set by Tanya

Streeter, at a depth of 525feet in a total dive time of 3 minutes and 26 seconds. This dive shattered the previous women's No Limits World Record held by Canadian, Mandy-Rae Cruickshank, who descended to an astounding 446feet! Streeter beat the record set by a man by nearly 20 feet.

If we assume that some of the historical accounts of mermaids are in fact women divers, then it means that the many sightings of mermaids indicate a past tradition of women divers throughout Europe, as well as America and Asia. In this light, the strange medieval tales of saints who encountering mermaids on the seashore, who would curse them as devils and threaten them

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with eternal damnation, seems much more plausible. The mermaids' usual response was to burst into tears. If these medieval mermaids were women divers, then it illuminates the Catholic Churches' hostility to these working women. And of course there was no doubt nudity attached to this profession, adding an air of wantonness to her actions. In the book *Mermaids, Witches, and Amazons*, mermaid historian William Bond suggests that it seems as if mermaids were associated with witches as being evil women, "and we know what the Christian Church did to witches." The witch hunts of the Middle Ages nearly wiped out the profession of women healers and herbalists, allowing this job niche to be taken over by male doctors. "It must also be remembered that up until the 20th century," Bond goes on to say, "women were discouraged from doing any work except the lowest paid menial jobs. Or work with no pay as a housewife." When

considering the selkie legends, and if we accept that at least some of the lore relates to native working women indigenous to Arctic regions who were essentially captured by Scottish islanders and compelled into marriage, then it is no wonder that the notion of a female doing a job was not compatible with the accepted worldview of the time. Women were there to serve the man and raise a family.

Men earned the livelihood. It is no wonder that within the selkie stories that the selkie seeks out any opportunity to escape.

But there are hints of working women in America as well. Christopher Columbus reported witnessing mermaids on his quest for the New World.

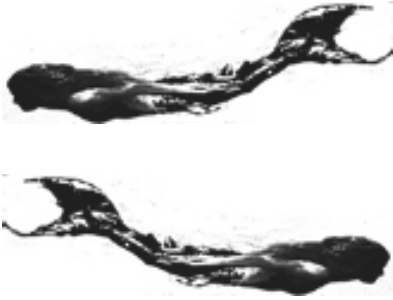
Were these native women divers curiously and cautiously watching a strange sight on the familiar ocean, remaining inconspicuous out of a natural fear of the unknown? John Smith, of Pocahontas fame, reportedly saw a mermaid in the waters off the coast of Massachusetts, in 1614. Smith writes that he sees the mermaid “swimming with all possible grace near the shore. The upper part of her body resembled that of a woman...no means unattract-

ive...[but] from below the waist the woman gave way to the fish.” Was this a native female diver possibly harvesting the vast clam fields of this region?

Mermaids make much better copy, so if the beings they saw were indeed female divers, well, mermaids sound much more romantic.

If we study the historical accounts of the sightings of mermaids, this tradition of working female divers must have continued into the 19th century.

The experience from Japan and Korea shows that divers were greatly compensated and the traditional divers in Europe may have received income as well. However, conquering religions brought with it a change in attitude



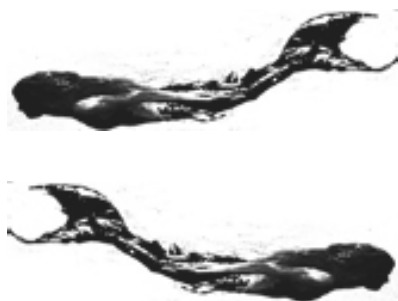
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*girl in a wetSuit by eleK iMredy, 1972 - Stanley Park, vanCouver,
Canada*

This statue in Vancouver, reminiscent of The Little Mermaid statue in Copenhagen, except that this is not a true mermaid. Notice this is a woman wearing swim-fins and a mask, a very modern take on the mermaid tradition. Vancouver has been the setting for quite a few mermaid sightings. The Times Colonist paper reported in 1967 that while a B.C. Ferry made its way through Active Pass, several of the passengers spotted what looked to them to be a Mermaid sitting on a rock eating a salmon. She had long hair, the torso of a woman and the lower half of a porpoise. The artist of this statue seems to suggest that there may be a human element behind the mermaid sightings in this area.

toward this ancient tradition of working women. Dispersions were now cast against these women who were now working outside of the newly established cultural norm. In fact, in some parts of Africa, female divers came to be referred to as river-witches. Bond asks this compelling question: “It is of interest that one of the foods banned by Judaism is shell-fish. Was this because

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it was women who traditionally harvest this food?” R. A. Donkin, in the book entitled *Beyond Price, Pearl and Pearl Fishing: Origins to the Age of Discovery*, writes, “Likewise in the 19th century pearl industry, western traders were horrified to learn that the locals used women pearl divers and even banned them in the Torres Strait islands”. The tradition of mermaids and their association with pearls is quite ancient. One term often applied to the mermaid was “Pearl Weepers.” Various myths record that mermaids

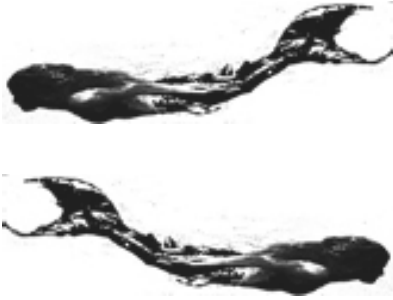
who can weep tears that instantly transforms into beautiful pearls. This may indeed be a folk memory of female divers who harvested pearls from oysters on the sea floor. A 15th-century compilation of quotations from Chinese literature tells of a mermaid who “wept tears which became pearls.” This is no doubt a cultural memory of women divers who gathered the pearls that male divers did not have the ability to harvest.

Male hostility and religious ideology may be the demise of the traditional female diver, erasing them from the history of the world’s culture. Before this tragic deletion, however, fishing villages along the world’s coasts were dependent on women who gathered and hunted from the abundance of

the sea, equipped physically to do a job the men simply could not perform.

These female divers harvested important food resources like shell fish and edible seaweed, as well as gathered tradeable commodities such as pearls and shells. As the Age of Discovery dawned, European outsiders, who were unaware of these traditional practices, would occasionally see the divers working in the waters as their ships slipped by. A passage in *The Secret History of Mermaids* states: “In a time when women were supposed to be physically weak, modest and submissive, these outsiders would be shocked to see, naked, athletic and assertive women confidently diving for marine food. It would be unlikely that the women would be clothed because wet clothing would be too much of a drag in water, and swimming costumes were not introduced until the Victorian times.” A naked working women makes no sense. A naked half-fish temptress was a much better alternative to the reality that did not make any sense to the conquering European mind.

The fascinating history of mermaid lore may be rooted, in some cases, in the very real world of the female, a world that so upset the status quo that it was ripped abruptly from the pages of the history books. It is a sad chapter, really, ignoring completely the amazing feats of skin clad women steering kayaks through the frigid waters of the North, only to be compelled into marriage by ignorant islanders who happened upon them as they came

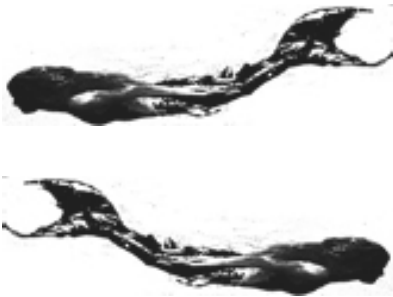


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aground. It is a travesty to consider that working women were transformed into witches so men wouldn't feel so defeated by the exploits of a woman.

This is the legacy of the mermaid that is a continuing human chapter on the subjugation of the female. She exists in our folk beliefs, in our collective unconscious, but she is not simply an archetype. Indeed, she was a provider who risked her life to support herself and others. This is just as fascinating as the mermaid and an important heritage that needs to be remembered.

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Mermaids and Mistaken Identity:

Manatees and Dugongs

On an expedition to investigate alleged sightings of the Skunk Ape in the Everglades in southern Florida during the spring of 1992, I made a stop at historical St. Augustine. Across from the 17th century fort of Castillo San

Marcos, a reminder of Spanish colonialism in the New World, I had the privilege to have an encounter with a creature which many scientists believe is the biological animal behind the mermaid's mythology. There, in the small protected bay, a baby manatee swam blissfully unaware of my presence. Or, if it was aware that I was there, it paid me no mind. I witnessed firsthand that spoon shaped tail and that pudgy brown body as it broke the rolling waves and disappeared into the salty waters of the Atlantic. But in all honesty, I had no inkling that this creature even slightly resembled a human, let alone a beautiful, enchanting woman with long flowing hair. Some scholars maintain that the appearance of the manatee to sailors out at sea for months, without any female companionship, may have infused their thoughts with a gnawing hopefulness and, thus deluded, found the size of these rotund animals far more appealing. A type of wish fulfillment, I suppose. And then there were the incidences of sailors and cases of bestiality that was covered up with the convenient alibi of the manatee being a mermaid. As I have never been out to sea for more than a few hours, I cannot testify to the alluring aspects of the manatee. So we shall endeavor to explore the possible circumstances of the manatee, and their relative the dugong, as the culprits behind the mermaid legend. That is, if the mermaid doesn't exist in its own right. Let us now investigate the mermaid as the misidentification of these known animals.

Actually, mainstream science has long ago borrowed the mermaid term of "siren" to classify this group of sea-dwelling creatures. Sirenia is an order of fully aquatic, herbivorous mammals that inhabit rivers, estuaries, coastal

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marine waters, swamps and marine wetlands. Sirenians, including manatees and dugongs, possess specialized aquatic adaptations. Their limbs have evolved to life in the water, the arms used for steering, becoming paddles used for propulsion. The remnants of the hind limbs, or their legs, conform into two small bones floating deep in the muscle. They look ponderous and clumsy but are actually fusiform, hydrodynamic and highly muscular, and mariners before the mid-nineteenth century did indeed refer to these animals as mermaids.

The manatee. Although slightly anthropomorphic in shape, these animals had been referred to as mermaids. It may be possible that this appellation was done rather tongue-in-cheek and had the same resonance of calling someone a “cow”

or a “chick.” One must never be too literal when dealing with the language of sailors.

As the anthropologist A. Asbjørn Jøn noted: “these ‘marine beasts’ have featured in folk tradition for many centuries now, and until relatively recently they have maintained a reasonably standard set of characteristics. Many folklorists and mythographers deem that the origin of the mythic mermaid is the dugong, posing a theory that mythicized tales have been constructed around early sightings of dugongs by sailors.” So, the impetus of the mermaid was from sightings of sirenia is the understanding for this statement.

And indeed, this may be the genesis for some notions of this creature. But as we investigate more deeply, these suppositions don’t, pardon the pun,

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hold water.

That sirenia are at home in river systems is quite a reasonable and rational conclusion for many so-called mermaid sightings in these areas around the world. Manatees are found throughout the tropics of the Western Hemisphere, and their far-flung range does indeed extend into the waters around West Africa. Moreover, the dugong, close relatives of the manatee, also have a range that includes East Africa. It was reported in 1599, recorded in the book *Historia Monstrorum*, that a mermaid and her mate was reported embracing near the Nile River delta. Undoubtedly this seems to be the sighting of sirenia.

The West African manatee is commonly known as “mamiwata.” This is

in reference to a female water-spirit found in some African cultures, particularly in the western coastal regions and central Africa. It is interesting that the descendants of the San of Africa see mermaids in the rivers to this very day. To a culture that once had its roots in the cycles of the natural world, it may indeed be rational to consider that the sirenia of the rivers in the region were simply personified.

And throughout the Middle Ages there are reports of mermaids seen in rivers. Mermaids have also been described as able to swim up rivers to freshwater lakes. In one story, recounted by KM Briggs in the 1967 book, *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature*, the Laird of Lorntie in Scotland went to aid a woman he thought was drowning in a lake near his house; a servant of his pulled him back, warning that it was a mermaid, and the mermaid screamed at them in such a way that it was certain that she would have killed him if it were not for his servant. A sirenia seen in a body of water by someone unfamiliar with aquatic creatures may be forgiven for mistaking a manatee for a mermaid. Seeing a slightly human shape rolling in the water may give the impression of someone in distress. And while not technically a scream, manatees and dugongs can vocalize in grunts. So I surmise that at least some historical mermaid reports are undoubtedly sirenia.

When Christopher Columbus entered the waters of the Caribbean, he reported sighting mermaids. He described them in a journal entry dated January 9, 1493, as appearing “not half as beautiful as they are painted.”

The log goes on to say that “the day before, when the Admiral was going to the Rio del Oro, he said he saw three mermaids who came quite high out of the water but were not as pretty as they are depicted, for somehow in the





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face they look like men. He said that he saw some in Guinea on the coast of Manegueta.

As we have discussed in a previous chapter, some researchers suggest that these mermaids may have been indigenous women divers working the sea for food resources. However, as the description is of a rather grotesque nature, it seems more plausible that a manatee was sighted rather than a physically conditioned Tiano native girl.

Speaking of Columbus, it is one of the cultures that Columbus made contact that gave us the word manatee. According to biologist Courtney French, who works closely with manatee rescuers, it is believed that the word manatee comes from the Carib word “manati,” meaning “woman’s breast.” So we can deduce, linguistically, that these creatures did incur an almost juvenile fascination with their breasts across various world cultures.

Another ship captain not as celebrated as Columbus, the infamous pirate Blackbeard, believed in the existence of mermaids as well, and he gave strict orders for his crew to never go near certain chartered waters. He believed the merfolk would enchant his crew away and they’d all perish or have bad luck. Again, this seems if the European imagination of the mermaid is informing the biased perception when witnessing a manatee.

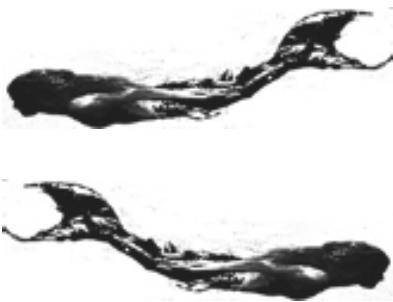
I am quite convinced that this does not apply to every case, but the manatee is undoubtedly the culprit in the vast majority of sightings of mermen. These mermen are not as romanticized as their feminine counterparts. Mermen have been described as wilder and uglier than mermaids, with little interest in humans. A bishop of Bergen, by the name of Pontoppidan, included

a mermaid sighting in his work entitled *Natural History of Norway*. He relates that in 1723 three Danish ferrymen sighted an old man with a short

black beard who submerged under the waves, showing only its fish-like tail as it swam from sight. This is most certainly the sighting of a sirenia. And by nearly all standards, manatees and dugongs are not very physically attractive creatures. It may be that the gradual subjugation of the feminine as a tempting vixen, which was already firmly established in the Middle Ages, may be the transformative element that transitioned the sirenia into the bewitching mermaid of lore.

On June 15, 1608, Henry Hudson, discoverer of the Hudson River, recorded seeing a mermaid near Russia. He wrote in his log: “two crew mem-

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bers...sighted a mermaid at 75° 7' N, and shouted at the rest of the crew to come and look.” Hudson further recorded it as having a “tail of a porpoise and speckled like a mackerel.” She was “looking earnestly on the men” who gathered on the side to see her. This seems to be an idealized sighting of a manatee by a man well acquainted with mermaid lore who simply transferred these beliefs onto the ocean-going mammal.

But this transference of beliefs onto the environment didn't end with the Age of Discovery. In fact, my home state of Pennsylvania has had a mermaid sighting. A Pennsylvania fisherman reported five sightings of a mermaid in the Susquehanna River near Marietta in June 1881. While this would be an aberrant sighting for a manatee, a seal may be behind this incident. Or it may be simply a great fisherman's tale.

But another siren, and not the manatee or dugong, may be the culprit in some sightings thought to be of mermaids. In the *Konungs skuggsjá* an Icelandic manuscript that has been dated to the 1400s. has a rather peculiar description of the mermaid:

The monster is tall and of great size and rises straight out of the water...

It has shoulders like a man's but no hands. Its body apparently grows narrower from the shoulders like a man's but no hands. Its body apparently grows narrower from the shoulders down, so that the lower down it has been observed, the more slender it has seemed to be. But no one has ever seen how the lower end is shaped...No one has ever observed it closely enough to determine whether its body has scales like a fish or skin like a man. When-ever the monster has shown itself, men have always been sure that a storm would follow.

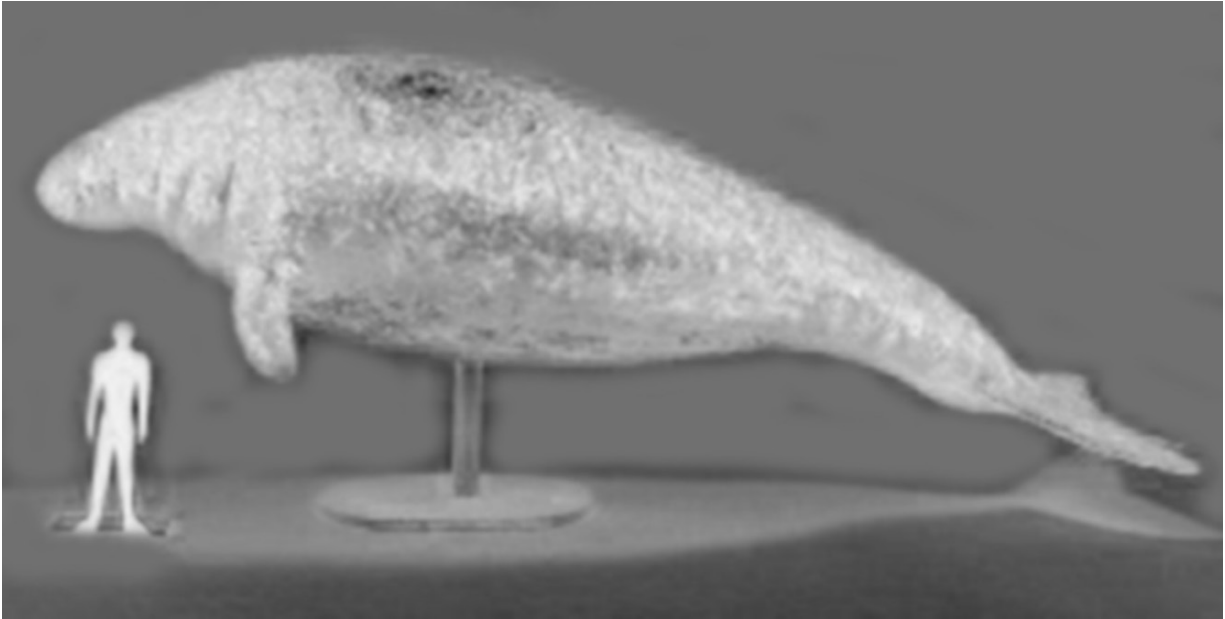
This brief 13th century description is quite interesting and strikingly different than other accounts of mermaids. What was the animal responsible for such a sighting? If not an actual mermaid giant, what else was observed in that northern ocean so long ago?

In reading the account carefully, I am struck with a couple of intriguing details. First, this creature was viewed as masculine: "...skin like a man."

This sets the tale in a whole new light. There is nothing beguilingly beautiful about this merman. The manatee seems to fit the bill for a scruffy man bobbing up and down in the waves. But the account also indicates that this merman was "tall and of great size." Mermaids, almost universally, are de-

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scribed as proportionate to their land-lubbing counterparts. Manatees can grow fairly large, but if they are the impetus of at least some of the mermaid encounters commemorated in historical reports, no one has ever written about the disproportionate size of these creatures. And while at sea, size is difficult to calculate. So what is a scientific explanation for this sea-giant?

scale representation to 6' human of the steller's sea cow

Living sirenians grow between 7 feet up to nearly 15 feet and can weigh over a ton. But something is different about this Icelandic account, not in the norm of most mermaid tales. This animal is much more peculiar. And the animal that I feel is responsible for this account is the *Hydrodamalis gigas*, or otherwise known as the Steller's sea cow. This beast is believed to be extinct, but it could reach lengths upwards of 30 feet! According to Richard Ellis, this lumbering creature probably could not dive below the surface. First recorded in 1741 by a German zoologist named Georg Wilhelm Steller, this gigantic sea cow's existence was made known to the

world. It was believed to have been killed off by 1768 by hunters who easily harvested the slow moving creatures. However, as a cryptozoologist, I thrive on the hopes that the verdict of extinction does not sentence all creatures to oblivion. But in the 1400s, Steller's sea-cow was certainly around and I believe it is this creature that was responsible for the merman sighting in Iceland and other accounts elsewhere in the northern climes. Moreover, this lumbering sea giant, I contend, is also the culprit in many legends involving sea-monsters.

An animal this big would qualify for a living island reported in many tales, notably in the lore that surrounds the Irish mystic St. Brendan the Navigator that reported such a creature in the mid-6th century.

A last point worth mentioning is that in many historic manuscripts, there

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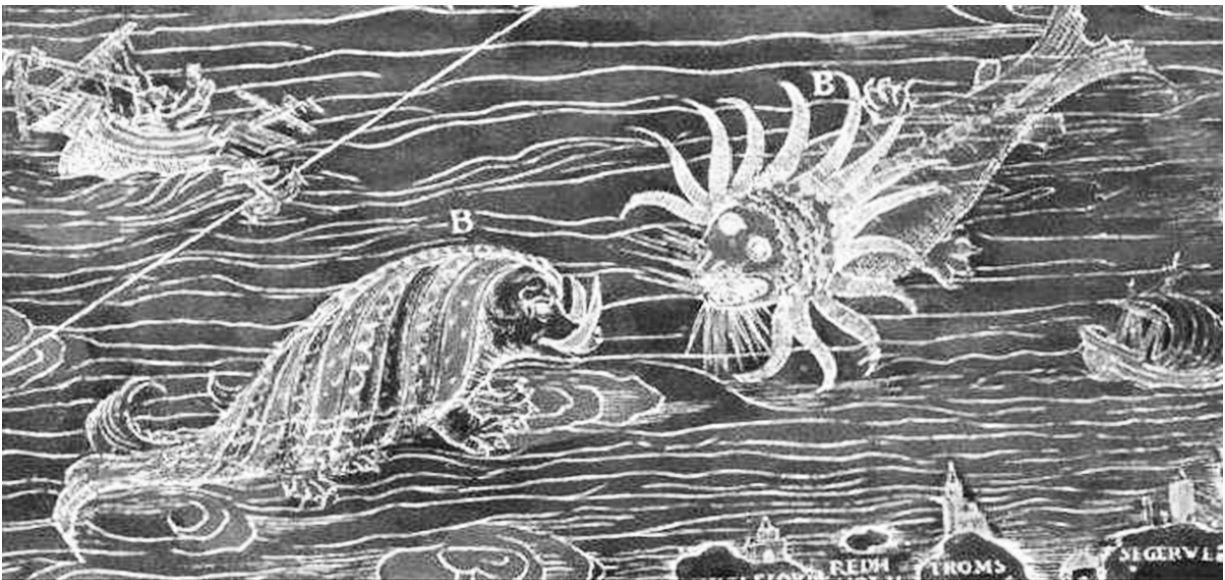
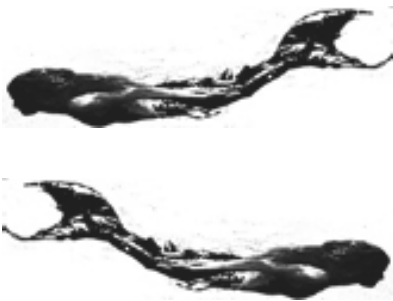
fro

Ortelius

detail

Abraham detail. Figure F. on the lower left may indeed be a representation of Steller's sea cow.

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it is possible that this animal, like many other faunae in the natural world, can sense approaching weather changes, and may take to open waters and the comparable safety there. When storms approach, ships head out to the

open sea. In fact, manatee and dugongs may have the same instinct to seek open waters in the event that storm fronts are coming through a particular area. This attribute may have been transferred to the mermaid, who are considered soothsayers. Moreover, if this theory is correct, then a sailor seeing a mermaid as a sign of bad luck may have the kernel of truth in that many a sailor has lost his life after they had spotted a sirenia seeking refuge from impending storms.

detail from the Carta Marina by Olaf Magnus, 1539

I contend that reports of sea monsters such as those pictured on this medieval map and the one mentioned by St. Brendan may indeed be accounts of the massive Steller's sea cow. Alas, although the Irish saint may have indeed encountered a sea cow, he makes no reports of mermaids.

Seeing this animal in the water by seagoers unfamiliar with this species could not be blamed for insisting that they had witnessed a bearded sea-giant!

Undoubtedly, manatees and dugongs were instrumental in various mer-

maid legends around the world. They can be inquisitive creatures and frequently pop their heads above the surface to investigate the goings on of the world above. They are mammals, giving birth to live young and breast feeding their offspring for up to two years. Now I can understand that a sailor seeing a breastfeeding manatee may possibly exaggerate that it was a mermaid. After all, a sea-going mammal with a calf could be quite confusing to an illiterate sailor who never caught sight on such a peculiar creature.

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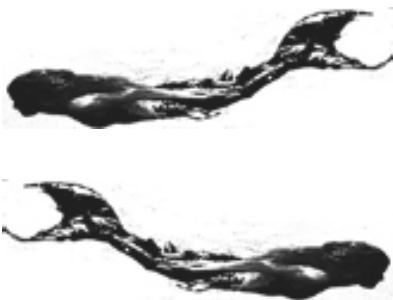
And manatees can communicate in squeaks that could be misconstrued as a song of such, especially if more than one creature was involved. Late at night in a pitch black sea such sounds could indeed engender images of the sirens of old. Minds may have begun playing tricks on sailors, filled with the preconceived notions of the mermaid.

The dugong's flat face may bear the slight resemblance to an old man. Because these animals are slow and defenseless, many cultures hunted them

for food. In 1739, sailors of the ship Halifax caught and ate several mermaids in the East Indies; the crew said they tasted like veal. Without a doubt, they were feasting on a dugong. Hopefully...

But there are things concerning the sirenia that simply do not account for many aspects of the mermaid legend. For instance, the Greek culture was unlikely to have had any interaction with either manatee or sirens. Bernard Heuvelmans has carefully scrutinized the process by which a biological animal transforms from, as Richard Ellis calls it, “one biomythological state into another.” In a 1990 article in the journal *Cryptozoology* entitled “The Metamorphosis of Unknown Animals into Fabulous Beasts and of Fabulous Beasts into Known Animals,” the noted researcher Heuvelmans states that “the mystifying process can sometimes be carried to the point of altering its object beyond recognition.” Heuvelmans goes on to write this concerning the manatee:

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Since the manatee has pectoral mammae—like its cousin the elephant and also humans—and a body that tapers to a fish-like tail, it has always been identified, on both sides of the Atlantic, with the fascinating mermaid, despite its (to our eyes) ugly face—and by the same token, considered cannibalistic, and sus-

pected of the most horrid crimes...Now, can anyone imagine a more peaceable, inoffensive creature than this sea-cow, which passes its days lazily browsing...succulent plants?

It seems that something else may be behind a few of these mermaid legends after all. The cultural and societal degradation of women over many centuries influenced the imagination to the point that any slightly anthropomorphic figure in the ocean or in rivers was believed to be a mermaid.

The feminine mystique was controlled and transferred from the human world to the animal world. Nature was endowed with powers and mystery, but those powers and those mysteries were appropriated from the female.

Women, in a way, had been tamed, subdued by the masculine world. But that wildness survived by projecting the independence of the woman onto the convenient canvas of the manatee and dugong. In so doing, these peaceful, aquatic mammals were given the same attributes as the mermaid, even the belief that they were blood-thirsty killers of careless sailors. Many a seaman returned home with stories of surviving encounters with these wanton, magical creatures. Some returned with more than just tales, however. Yes, some sailors returned home with the actual body of a mermaid!

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Jenny Hanivers and the

Art of Fake Mermaids

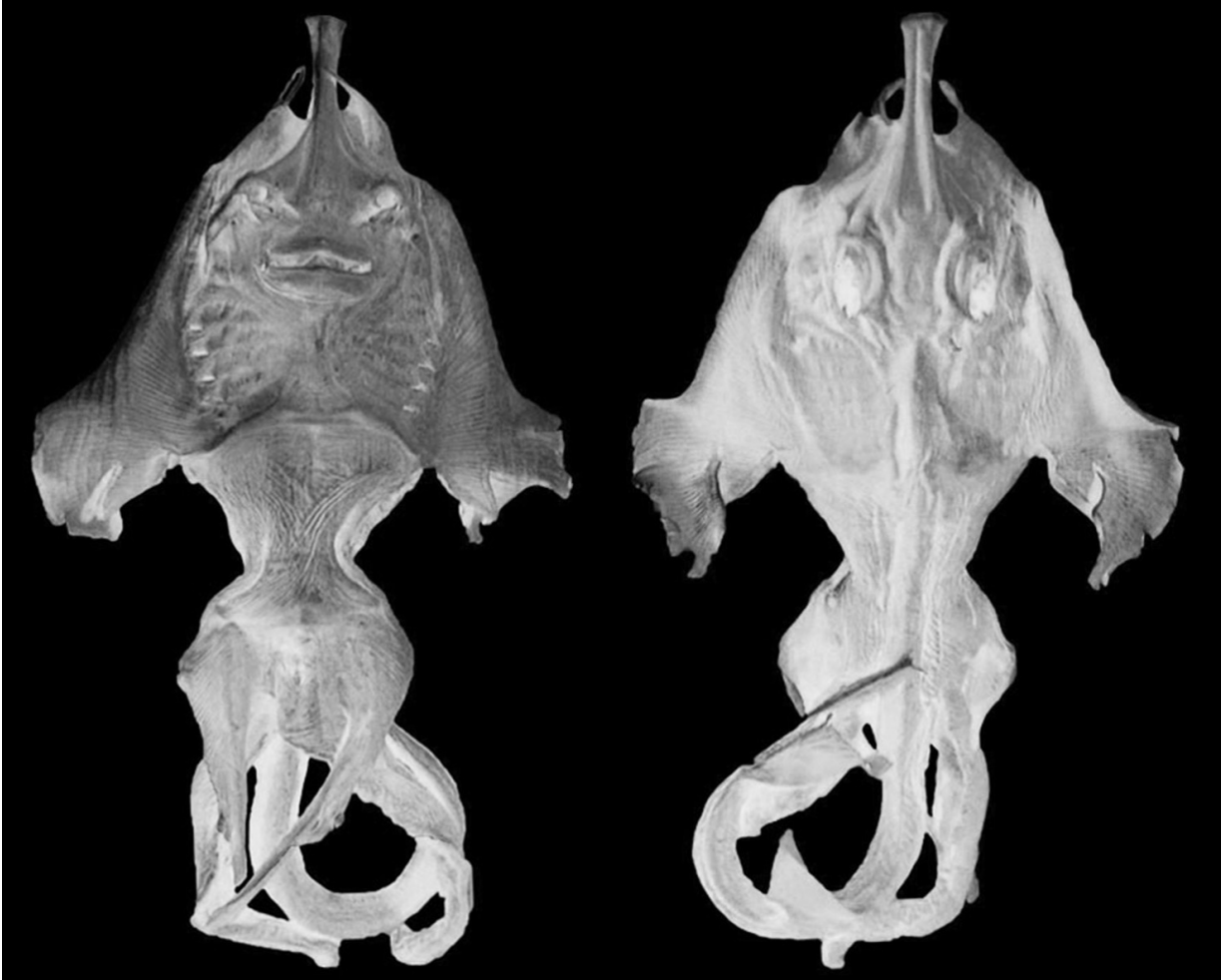
On a trip to Portland, Maine, several years ago, I had the pleasure of experiencing a mermaid face-to-face. It was in Loren Coleman's Cryptozoological Museum and the mermaid was behind a display glass. It was my first actual viewing of a Jenny Haniver in person and when it greeted me I was stirred with the same sense of incredulous awe that would have stirred in the minds of those looking at it in the 19th century. It was expertly made and if presented to a wide-eyed carnival goer in the late 1800s, the effect may have indeed been quite convincing. But the art of the fake mermaid is quite old. The reason being, I feel, is that people simply want to believe in mermaids and Jenny Hanivers and the ilk provide the tangible evidence needed to prove that they roam our seas. Seeing a Jenny Haniver is akin to seeing a department store Santa in December—it is obvious proof that our wide-eyed childish worldview is correct.

So what exactly is a Jenny Haniver? Well, what it is not is the stereotypical representation of the beautiful female mermaid. Indeed, initially, the Jenny Haniver was actually the preserved carcass of a ray or a skate species which had been somewhat artistically modified and preserved, resulting in a rather grotesque faux specimen. The name, Jenny, might have originated from Anglicized French, with “Jeux Ani,” roughly indicating “game animals,” a hint to their origination. Alternatively, Jenny, short for Jennifer, means ‘fair’

or ‘white,’ which may indicate the common color or pallor associated with the merfolk.

For centuries, sailors in Antwerp crafted these “mermaids” out of the remains of dried skates. They then preserved them further with a coat of var-nish. They supported themselves by selling these gaffes to visiting sailors as 121





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well as to tourists. Moreover, the use of skates and rays have been used to supply evidence of many of the world's mysteries. For instance, Jenny Hanivers have been created to look like devils, angels and dragons, providing tangible proof that such creatures exist.

a dried guitarfish (ray family) with no Modifications

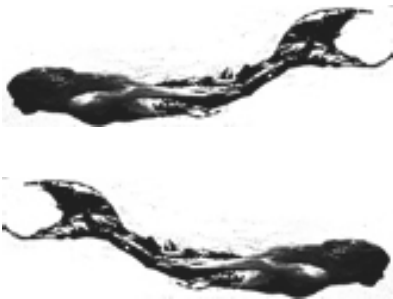
The production of these specimens can be traced back to 16th century Japan, where that culture created these gaffes as proof of the ningyo, the

mermaid of that region. According to the article entitled “Tenshou-Kyousha Shrine Mermaid Mummy,” published in the *Atlas Obscura*, some of these Japanese mermaids were even placed in shrines, having religious significance within the culture.

The religious heritage associated with the Japanese Jenny Hanivers may have migrated with the knowledge of how to create them. Even the legendary sea monk, a kind of priestly mermaid, may have been inspired by a Jenny Haniver.

Now, it was a pervasive ancient belief that every land animal must have a counterpart in the sea, and humans were no exception. Clearly, there must be sea cows and sea horses and sea swine out there. So while we had the

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guitarfiSh ShaPed while drying to beCoMe a Jenny haniver

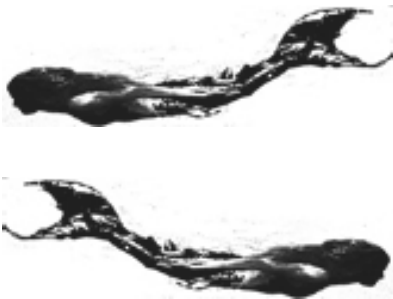
The first Jenny Haniver was probably created out of the carcass of a ray or skate.

With a cut here and a slice there, the form of something anthropomorphic begins to take shape. While not at all beautiful, these grotesques at least verified that mermaids did exist out there in the boundless sea.

mermaid representing us in sea, some claimed that things got even more specific, and that the clergy had their own aquatic representatives.

Jenny Hanivers, as a commodity, were soon in demand. During the Renaissance and the Baroque eras, the remains of mermaids were a staple of cabinets of curiosities. It was proof of God's handiwork, and having such a specimen also alluded to the idea that the owner was wealthy and erudite.

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Also, according to the website *Circle of the Dragon*, these gaffes were used to prove the existence of evil in the world and they were made for “the veneration of the Christians Saints, as relics or to display as overpowered dragons.”

The earliest known picture of Jenny Haniver appeared in Konrad Gesner’s *Historia Animalium* in 1558. Gesner rightly warned that these were merely disfigured rays and should not be believed to be miniature dragons or monsters, which was a popular misconception at the time. The most common misconception was that Jenny Hanivers were basilisks. Basilisks were creatures that killed with merely a glance, so it followed that no one could claim to know how one looked. For this reason, it was easy to pass off Jenny Hanivers as these basilisks which were still widely feared in the 1500s.

The practice of making fabulous designer monsters became very popular in Europe and this fashion soon migrated to the United States. Even after the deceptive nature of these Jenny Hanivers was well known, there were still people gullible enough to believe that these creations were actual pre-the “feeJee MerMaid,” eriC goSSelin, 1999 - international CryPtozo-

ology MuSeuM

A prop recreation of the original Fiji Mermaid used in the 1999 A&E biopic “P.T.

Barnum.” Now housed at the International Cryptozoology Museum in Portland, Maine.

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served creatures taken from nature. As it has been said, “there is a sucker born every minute.” And here indeed is where one of the greatest showmen the world has ever known enters the scene.

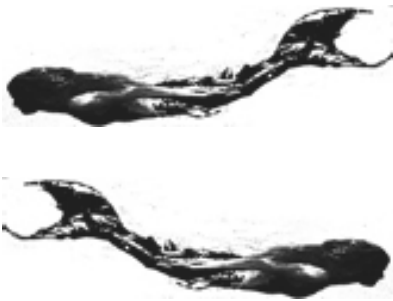
PT Barnum was a 19th-century showman in the truest sense of the word.

He became famous by filling his museum with interesting things that no one had seen before, such as the Fiji mermaid. He charged a quarter for people to look at all the curiosities he claimed as true specimens. PT Barnum's Circus displayed Jenny Hanivers between 1848 to 1933. The most popular example of this sideshow gaffe was something called the Feejee Mermaid.

The phonetic misspelling seems to be a bit of a snide remark aimed at Barnum's viewing public. Unlike the Jenny Haniver created from the mangling engraving from the guidebook *Sights in Boston and Suburbs*, Midgley & Pulsifer, 1857

A woman ogles the Feejee mermaid at a Barnum show.

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of a skate, this Feejee mermaid appeared much more humanistic. It had as an upper body the preserved portion of a juvenile monkey, while the lower torso was of a fish. The illusion of a mermaid was completed with near surgical skill in the stitching of the two halves together.

The Feejee mermaid, one of which is on display at the Cryptozoological Museum in Maine, became a common feature of sideshows, where it was

presented as the mummified body of a creature that was supposedly of a mermaid. The original had fish scales with animal hair superimposed on its body with pendulous breasts on its chest, alluding to the alluring aspect of the mermaid of legend. The mouth was wide open with its teeth bared. The right hand was against the right cheek, and the left tucked under its lower left jaw. This mermaid was supposedly caught near the Fiji Islands in the South Pacific. To the city crowd, this setting served as an exotic locale where creatures like this may indeed exist. Several replicas of this mermaid was made and exhibited under similar names and within different contexts. The original Jenny Haniver of this mer-

maid, which was exhibited by PT Bar-

num in Barnum's American Museum

in New York beginning in 1842 van-

ished from history, believed by many

to have been consumed in the 1860s

in one of the many fires that destroyed

much of Barnum's collections.

In his *Secrets of the Sideshows*, carnival historian Joe Nickell documents that many attractions, such as Ripley's

Believe it or Not, still display versions
of Jenny Haniver mermaids. Indeed,
the lure of the lore of the mermaid
still exists to this day, drawing people
in. With this popularity, the creation
a Jenny haniver dragon
of Jenny Hanivers have went beyond
sewing a monkey to a mackerel. Now the Jenny Haniver has went high
tech.

To capitalize on the gullibility of the general public is nothing new. Just ask
Barnum. And this public will still pay to view the “proof” of what they hope
exists. But as the sideshow has drifted into the periphery, television has be-

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THE SEA-MONK.

ON MERMAIDS

come the medium through which frauds are perpetrated on a massive scale.

And one program stirred such an uproar that a government agency actually had to post a statement on the existence of mermaids.

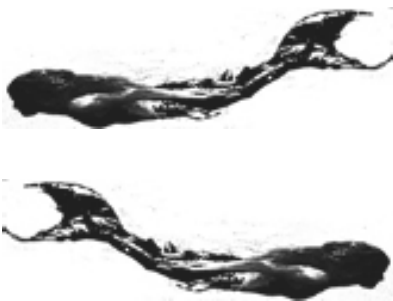
engraving from ChamberS' booK of dayS, 1869

As we have studied, the medieval world believed in direct counterparts to our world living in the seas. If priests lived on land, surely God ordained monks in the ocean depths. From this etching, we can plainly see the skate form of this figure. The “robes” and clerical garb is the scaling and artistically carved flesh of the animal.

In May of 2012, the basic cable network, Animal Planet, broadcasted the fake documentary, *Mermaids: The Body Found*. A year later, *Mermaids: The New Evidence*, aired under the guise of a real news documentary.

These electronic Jenny Hanivers drew in 3.6 million viewers, many of who that the facts presented were true. It was on TV for goodness sake. On a network known for airing animal documentaries. This gullibility can be somewhat excused, because Animal Planet went full-Barnum promoting this spe-

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cial. In faked footage, the show purported to show mermaids hunting in the ocean depths. It looked genuine. It showed a mermaid body washed ashore.

What's not to believe. Well, everything it turned out. Yet so many people thought that what they were seeing was genuine, the National Ocean Service, a scientific agency of the US Commerce Department, issued the statement that mermaids do not exist after being bombarded with questions regarding mermaids. The Discovery Channel, parent company of Animal planet, admitted that some viewers mistook the program for a science documentary, and, in a way, apologized for misleading the public.

But what this program did indeed do was shed light on the massive amount of Americans who are beguiled by the mythos of the mermaid. This aquatic creature that may only swim in the ocean of the mind, still infects our culture. We long for its existence, regardless of what the official government statement says. It represents the untamed world. It personifies a wildness that is as beguiling as its siren song. We need the mermaid.

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The Contemporary

Mermaid

So this has been quite a journey, has it not? I thank you for sailing with me over the Seven Seas, across oceans of time, and climbing into human thought and conjecture concerning a creature so utterly fascinating yet so completely unattainable as the mermaid. She is the sea, wild and wanton.

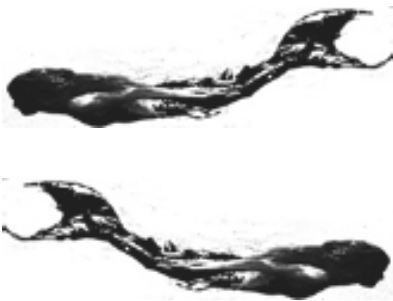
She sings to me, her song the sound of every breaking wave on the sandy shore. You see, the mermaid exists today in the hearts and minds of the human consciousness just as much as it did thousands of years ago. The mermaid is still out there, just below the salty surface, calling us in.

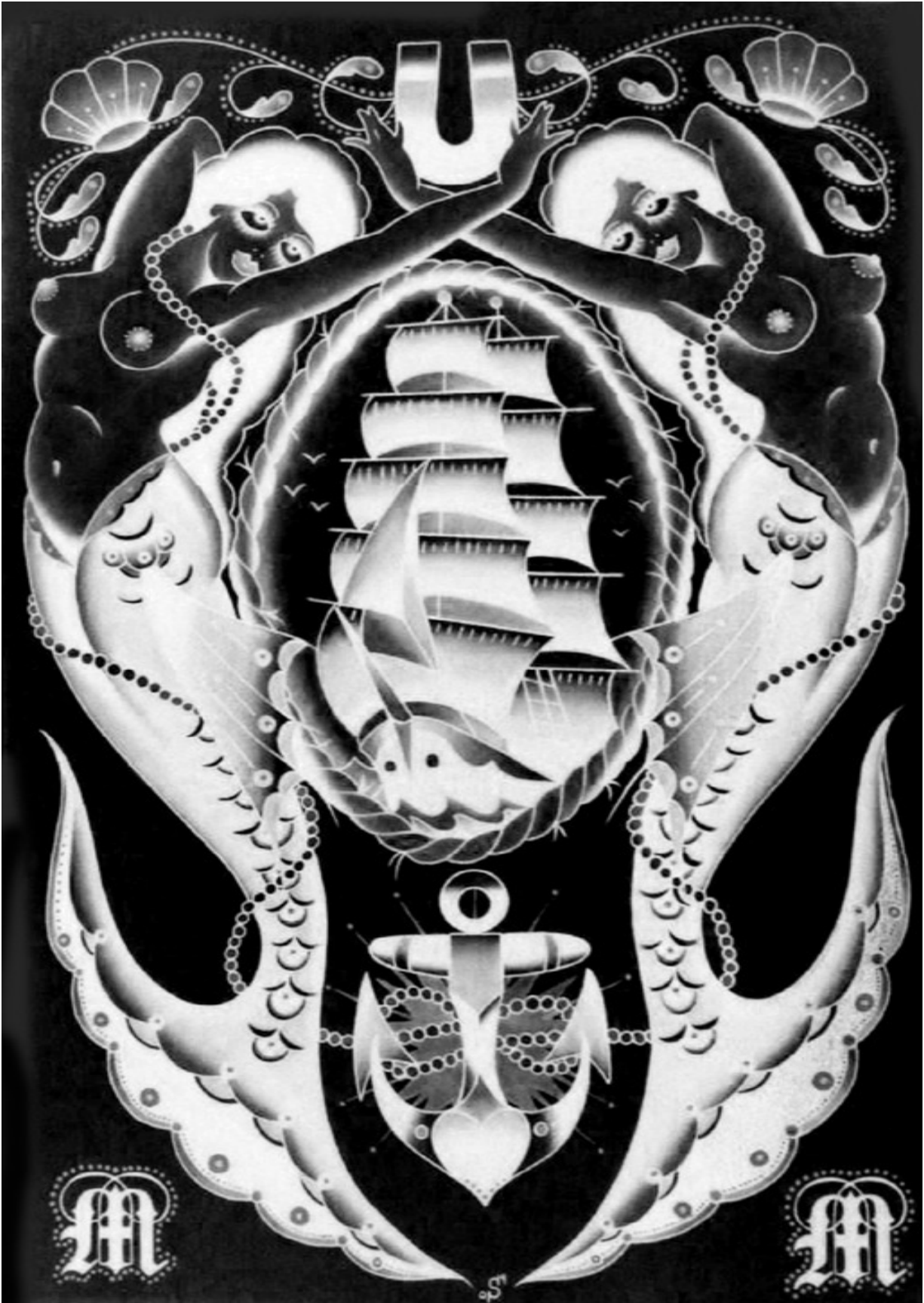
The mermaid is indelibly etched on our psyche and, in some cases, even on our skin. As sailors of old would tattoo sirens as a totem against the creature they hoped to avoid, contemporary seaman (and those wishing they were) continue the same time honored tradition of having the image of the mermaid inked on diverse body parts.

The mermaid is art, worn on the skin, revealing the inner wild-child inside the woman or acting as the unattainable siren for wishful men. She has left the sea and walks our streets, magically manifested in human form. She is a cultural icon who washes over our world.

Of course, Hans Christian Anderson informs our cultural thought about the mermaid than anyone else. His popular “The Little Mermaid,” first published by C.A. Reitzel in Copenhagen on the 7th of April 1837 in a collection of tales for little ones entitled, *Fairy Tales Told for Children*, informed the ubiquitous Disney character. Like Tinker Bell who has become our imagined image of what a faerie looks like, the teenage redheaded Belle is now the way we imagine mermaids. She is beauty without vanity, with a dash of an uneasy Lolita sexualized innocence. Anderson draws much of

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encircle the two mermaids, perhaps an inadvertent homage to the signifying love that someone is anchored into this quagmire of temptation. The mermaid stares off, rather unamused, strands of and of an scene. style This writing. encircling other

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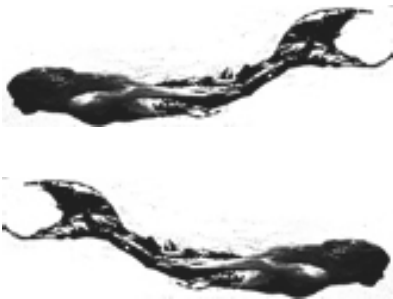




ON MERMAIDS

his tale from precedents of the past and informs the mermaid's future. His mermaid is immediately relatable. She wants to be somewhere she isn't. She wants to belong. As we long for communion with the watery world of the oceans, the Little Mermaid wants to experience the sand. In an homage to the witchery of mermaids, Anderson has his protagonist wanting to escape *This tattoo is specifically designed for women. The mermaid is situated away from the viewer. She is not shy or coy; indeed, she is practicing an art that requires privacy and secrecy. Magic is afoot. The starfish forms a pentacle, an ancient symbol representing the union of the elements. This is not an undine tempting a man with her naked breasts. No nudity is present in this tattoo nor does there need to be. As her terrestrial counterparts dove into the sea to collect pearls and other treasures, so too does this mermaid. Yet this pearl that she has discovered appears as a crystal ball. She doesn't need a mirror to scree the future; indeed, the elements congeal in this work-- the pearl transformed into a natural object of divination. This mermaid is not concerned with you. She is about her own private divination into a future to which the viewer has no access.*

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her surroundings by employing the charms of a sorcerous. Although the tale claims mermaids can live for 300 years, this mermaid wants a soul, a direct allusion by the author to the teachings of the Middle Ages. And Anderson further delves into the mermaid mythos by having his mermaid fall in love with a human man. As did the shapeshifting selkies escape the tides to take

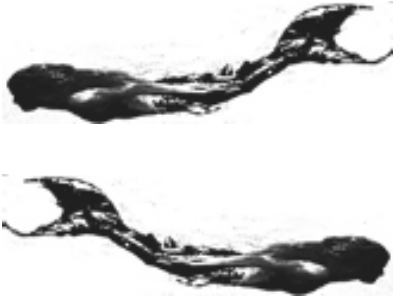
a human lover, so too did this mermaid. In the same vein as the goddess Atargatis, the mermaid loved the world beyond the surf.

This universal quest to seek what is beyond oneself is an archetypal motif too good not to adapt to the screen. But something has occurred with the perception of the mermaid. She is no longer a demon-spawned temptress luring sailors to their watery demise. No, now the mermaid is a wide-eyed innocent who seeks knowledge of a world she knows nothing of. As we have seen in the latter medieval attitude of the mermaid, she is a virginal creature in a constant state of watery grace. It is only in her interaction with the world above the surface does the mermaid's life become complicated.

In the Ron Howard helmed flick, *Splash*, from back in 1984, the Daryl Hannah mermaid is beautiful and alluring, but not overtly so. This mermaid is not using her outward appearance to corrupt. No, she is a blank slate, a woman-child that needs nurtured and protected. This mermaid is not feared; indeed, she needs protected from our world. If anything the mermaid has become a being quite easy for many women to relate to.

The adolescent fantasy, *Aquamarine*, a 2006 Australian-American teen fantasy comedy film starring Emma Roberts, reiterates this motif of the mermaid as an innocent. The film, which was loosely based on a children's book of the same name by Alice Hoffman, is a rather saccharine romp involving two close-knit friends that discover a beautiful teenage mermaid washed ashore after a violent storm. In the same vein as *Splash*, *Aquamarine* is another fish out of water tale. However, juxtaposed against the pubescent world of teenage angst, quite a few girls could relate to a stranger wanting to belong in a world that is sometimes quite difficult to understand.

Of course, there are still the occasional flicks that mine the more terrifying aspects of the mermaid legend, but for the most part they are poorly realized schlock with the movie focusing on the sexuality of the mermaid rather than dealing with the substance of the myths. The Spanish film, *Dagon*, at least approaches the subject with a degree of intelligence. The movie based its plot is actually on H. P. Lovecraft's novella *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*. It 132



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concerns a cult of fish-men worshipping the ancient merman god we studied back in chapter 3.

The film entitled *She Creature* is probably the best of the lot in viewing the mermaid as less than an innocent creature. The IMDb synopsis is this: “A carnival worker (Rufus Sewell) abducts a mermaid (Rya Kihlstedt) in Ireland, circa 1900, and decides to transport her to America. As their ship loses its way and heads towards the legendary Forbidden Islands, the mermaid begins to display her deadly side.” This mermaid was presumably headed to a PT Barnum-type of sideshow, this creature becoming a living Jenny Haniver to be gawked at for two bits by slack-jawed yokels. It must be pointed out that this mermaid was captured by humanity and subjected to a form of slavery and thus was forced to convey her sirenia aspects as a means of escape. In the end, the female who was subjugated rises against her aggressors and returns to her element and absolute freedom. While she did exhibit a ferociousness, this mermaid still symbolized a world beyond our understanding. She was captured and forced into our world, thus losing her innocence at the corrupting hands of humanity.

But it is not the horror of the mermaid that captures our cultural imagination. No, it is the mermaid’s innocence and magic that inspires us. My daughter Willow’s utter fascination with the Australian television series entitled, appropriately enough, *H2O*, is actually what drove me to write this book. She would watch the reruns of this program ad nauseum, beginning with the first episode of the series, then watch each episode in chronological order until she watched all 78 episodes. She sometimes completed this task in a week, especially in the summer months. But so much of these show seeped into my brain subconsciously I used the writing of this book as a

kind of exorcism. This rather innocuous series featured sixteen-year-old Australian girls who find themselves stranded on the totally fictional Mako Island, which is a mysterious dormant volcano right off the coast, a child's sanitized version of the Forbidden Islands seen in the movie *She Creature*. The girls eventually find themselves in a pool of ocean water that rises up in a cave just as a full moon passes overhead, bathing the pool in its gossamer faerie influence. This event magically transforms the teenagers into mermaids that lose their fins when they are dry but the moment they interact with water, they transform within seconds back to a fish-tailed mermaid. The girls attempt to return to their high school world, but soon discover their lives have become anything but normal. After further experimentation, the girls also discover

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they have supernatural powers over water, hearkening back to the tradition of the magical abilities of mermaids. Everyday situations, such as bathing and rain, become tricky as the girls struggle to cope with their newfound abilities, which have just as many advantages as disadvantages, while also trying to keep them a secret from everyone else, including their families. They soon adapt to their new abilities and lifestyles.

The series involved episodes about divorce and sibling rivalry, boy problems and the needs for friends, all the while keeping within a recognizable mermaid tradition that stretches back to the dawn of civilization. The magic of the mermaid is evident and indeed the catalyst through which they transform. Like the mermaid of old, they have powers to control the waters.

But instead of summoning waves to sink hapless ships, they use their abilities to drench mean girls or to freeze water to make someone slip in slapstick fashion.

One of my favorite episodes involved the siren aspect of the mermaid.

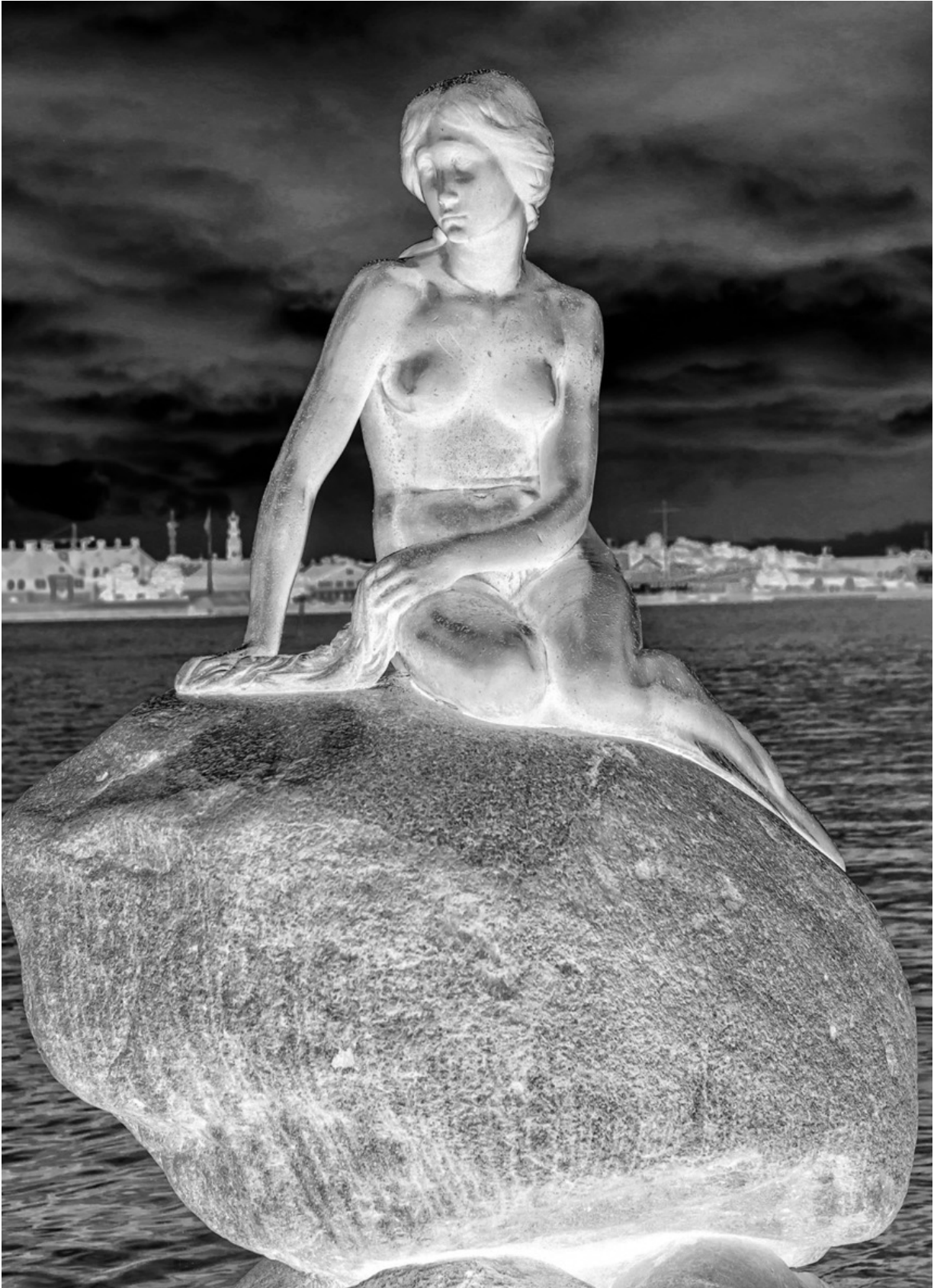
Appearing on a radio show, the teenage girl, who is normally tone deaf and unremarkable with the boys, is able to magically entrance all of the boys in Sydney who were listening to the program by singing a lilting song. The boys eventually surround her house, lured in by her voice. As is the case with most things magical, the enchantment wears off and the teenage girl continues on with her life hardly noticed. But in dealing with the tradition of the mermaid, *H2O* is a firmly modern take on the ever developing modern tradition of the mermaid as a shy creature looking to fit in.

And this is where we find ourselves. We live in a world with references to mermaids seen nearly daily without any fear or apprehension. We don't depend on the sea as our ancestors did. It is no longer our highway. Oceans are crossed in hours in a plane rather than months in a boat. We still have the same affinity to the oceans, but we wade into its waves or sit on its beaches reading pulp fiction paperbacks during summer vacation. We don't fear the waves so we no longer fear the mermaid who had personified the seas for so long. We actually want to be a part of it. Some people even dress the part!

Interest in mermaid costuming has grown alongside the popularity of fantasy cosplay as well as the availability of inexpensive monofins used in the construction of mermaid costumes. These costumes are typically designed to be used while swimming, in an activity known as "mermaiding." Mermaid fandom conventions have also been held. To this day, tourists flock







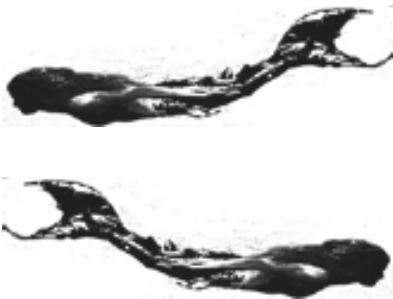
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to see the mermaids of Weeki Wachee Springs in Florida. The company's website promotes: "See the world famous mermaids of Weeki Wachee

Springs as they perform their version of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*." Mermaids are now a part of our culture. And they aren't the little MerMaid (bronze Statue), edvard eriKSen, 1913

- *CoPenhagen, denMark*

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going anywhere. This fact hits home when we consider the trademark logo of Starbucks.

According to their official website, the Starbuck's logo goes all the way back to 1971, to when Starbucks was first developing as a business model.

"In a search for a way to capture the seafaring history of coffee and Seattle's strong seaport roots, there was a lot of poring over old marine books going on. Suddenly, there she was: a 16th century Norse woodcut of a twin-tailed mermaid, or Siren." They chose as their representative the figure of a melusina, the mermaid we first encountered back in the Middle Ages. To the PR

people at Starbucks, "there was something about her – a seductive mystery mixed with a nautical theme that was exactly what the founders were

looking for. A logo was designed around her, and our long relationship with the Siren began.”

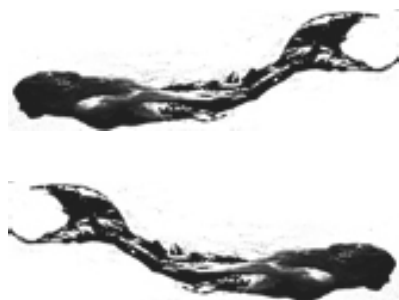
But the melusina was originally a figure with the lower half of a serpent that transformed in water. To some thinkers, like Martin Luther, she was a demonic succubus, sucking the life out of unwary men. Now the melusina is still a succubus, but instead of stealing souls, this modern mermaid sucks \$7 out of people’s pockets for a medium coffee. This melusina is not an alluring temptress; she has been transformed into a spokesperson peddling coffee. She has lost her vitality. She has been tamed.

This taming process is readily seen in the evolution of the logo. Bared breasts are hidden under the stereotypical flowing tresses, but the belly button is still there in the first logo. Inherent as well is the rather naughty attitude of the melusina, holding her tail aloft as if they were legs, inviting the viewer to...ummm...come closer.

Observe the current logo. They cropped the siren image so that only a hint of the tails is visible. The melusina has been tamed in quite probably the last act of subjugation perpetrated against the mermaid.

No longer does the two tales of this aquatic creature represent the duality of the cosmos, no, now the two tails indicate the dual nature of coffee. She is sanitized and compartmentalized. She is the Jenny Haniver on display. It seems the only place the mermaid is truly within her element is in the sea of a child’s imagination.

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From Left: 1971-1987; 1987-1992; Present Logo

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Final Thoughts

In Kiryat Yam in Israel, there were a number of mermaid sightings reported in 2009. People said they saw mermaids that leapt out of the water and did tricks in the air just off the coast. Dozens saw these creatures, and they became so talked about that the government offered a million dollars for proof. Of course, that proof never materialized. The elusive mermaid seemed to be simply saying that she still existed in the natural world, beyond just being a logo on a Styrofoam cup. The oceans make up a huge portion of our world, and there is so much unknown about them. With legends that start from the beginning of time, and sightings that continue even to this day, it is hard to eliminate mermaids from being possible. It is possible that they do indeed swim undiscovered in our waters. Maybe they have learned the patterns of our shipping lanes and stay clear of our intruding human boats.

Maybe they know what would happen if they tried to make contact with the world above the waves. This book was an attempt at surveying the mermaid world that lives within the confines of the human consciousness, but I don't even begin to breach the surface of all the mermaid lore that exists. And mermaids don't do well confined anyway. Their true nature is wild and free.

The mermaid in our culture is the most persistent and pervasive symbol of the old Goddess energy that represents women, particularly the mysterious, life-generating element. Instead of reveling in the power and glory of the female, it was easier to mythologize their attributes and personify their actions as forces of nature. But like nature, they are, in all ways unpredictable. Let us keep them that way.

And keep your eyes-- and your mind-- open the next time your stand in the surf and the waves lure you in.

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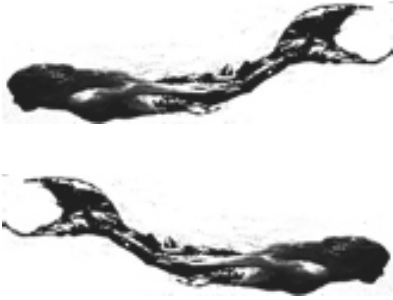
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